

COMPLETE PLAYS

J.P. DAS

Edited by

Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee

J. P. Das's first play *Before the Sunset* appeared in the 1970s which was a glorious period of modern Indian drama, when playwrights writing in different languages were widely translated and staged all over the country and a sense of a national Indian theatre was developing. *Before the Sunset* was first staged in its Bangla version in Kolkata in 1972, and then produced in Hindi in Delhi directed by Ram Gopal Bajaj with Om Puri playing the lead. An English translation of the play was published in the theatre magazine *Enact* and translations into Punjabi, Gujarati, Marathi, Kannada and other languages followed to be staged in different parts of the country. Over the years the play has achieved the status of a classic.

This volume brings together under one cover all the plays of J.P. Das which came out in their English versions at different times. The plays in this volume are very different from each other in characterisation and treatment. Each play stands its own ground as a marker of some of the tensions that disturb the modern man and our contemporary society.

This volume will bear testimony to the versatility of J.P. Das who is also a well-known poet, fiction-writer and essayist.

Cover Photo: Sundardas at IGNCA, 2009



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Introduction

The 1970s were a glorious age of modern Indian drama, when playwrights writing plays in different languages were widely translated and staged all over the country. A sense of a national Indian theatre developed with the plays of Mohan Rakesh, Vijay Tendulkar, Badal Sircar and Girish Karnad spearheading the movement. The English theatre magazine *Enact*, published from Delhi and popular with theatre enthusiasts all over India, documented and also, in its own way, promoted this phenomenon.

J.P. Das's play *Before the Sunset* appeared at this opportune moment. Written in 1971 in Odia it was first staged in its Bangla version in Kolkata in 1972. It was broadcast over the radio in 1974 and having won an award, its Hindi translation landed in the All India Radio headquarters in Delhi. It was picked up from there by Ram Gopal Bajaj and staged under the banner of the then leading theatre group *Dishantar* in Delhi in 1976 with actor Om Puri in the lead. An English translation of the play was published in the *Enact* and translations into Punjabi, Gujarati, Marathi, Kannada and other languages followed, to be staged in different parts of the country. Over the years there have been more translations and productions and the play has achieved the status of a classic.

Basically a poet, J.P. Das had written two short one-act plays *Miss X* and *Made For Each Other* in 1960, and had also written some radio plays in the 60s (which unfortunately have not been preserved). He followed up *Before the Sunset* with *The Underdog* and *Absurd Play* and after a long hiatus wrote *Sundardas*.

The English translations had come out close on the heels of the original Odia publications: *Suryasta Purvaru* (1977), *Saba Shesha Loka* (1980), *Asangat Natak* (1981), and *Sundardas* (1993). The two one-act plays written in 1960 were published in Odia as *Purvarag* in 1983 only. The English translations of the plays (except *Sundardas*) were first published in *Enact* magazine before coming out in book form. Besides the playwright himself, the other translators of the plays are Paul St-Pierre and Leelawati and K.K. Mohapatra who have translated J.P. Das's other literary works, and actor Ravi Baswani who acted in and directed *The Underdog*.

It is interesting to note that all the plays were staged in their translated versions outside Odisha before being staged in Odia in Odisha. When *Suryasta Purvaru* was staged in Hindi in Delhi, the title following the original Odia should have been *Suryaast Se Pehle*. However, the theatre persons at *Dishantar* thought *Suryaast* should be fine, and Director Ram Gopal Bajaj made it *Suryastak*—a shorter version of *Suryaast Tak*! However, when the play was published in Hindi, both the playwright and the Director decided to call it *Suryaast*.

In between writing plays, J.P. Das has written short stories, poems, a historical novel, essays on literature, and poems for children and nonsense verses. He has also done research on art and come out with several volumes on Odishan art. Shifting amongst several genres he has not written many plays but has been able to secure a lasting place among the leading playwrights of the country.

In his first work *Before the Sunset*, the playwright portrays an individual who despite all the luxuries in life and the honour that comes with it is still dissatisfied. The never ending tragedy of the protagonist's struggle with his own self and existence has been presented in the play in a very poetic and dramatic way, and with a great deal of empathy for the underlying pathos. The protagonist, Deepankar, has been used by the playwright also as the *sutradhar* in the play. On the occasion of the delicate, decisive and important milestone of his fortieth birthday, the protagonist undertakes to look at the successes and failures in his life and in the process introduces

the reader-audiences to his worldview and his view of the associated characters—his boss Sanjoy, wife Sheila and the best-friend-lover Saroj. The use of a 'court' setting as a theatrical technique has also aided in bringing this out very effectively.

Deepankar is basically a self-indulgent person full of self-pity and with no clarity in life whatsoever. He is completely disgusted with his environment and his relationships, even though he does not know what he actually desires from himself and from others. It is paradoxical that the superficial and make-believe life that Deepankar is so bored with actually begins to reflect in him and shows him as a superficial person. But if we remember that one of his life's main ambitions was to play a role in theatre, we find the very dramatic nature of his character providing a different, artistic dimension to the playwright's technique. The entire play takes place in the cusp of reality and fantasy. Sometimes this is reflected in Deepankar's drawing room and at others in his subconscious mind. Thus it turns out to be a sensitive, sophisticated and most intelligently contrived drama spanning a few hours in the life of the protagonist and the people close to his life. Ultimately, Deepankar fails to break through the cocoon of security although existence to him is jejune and empty.

J.P. Das who had been connected with the leftist movement in his student days has been writing about the oppressed classes in his poems and short stories; the entire collection of poems in his anthology *Dark Times* brings out his social concerns. It is, therefore, no surprise that immediately after exploring the man-woman relationship in *Before the Sunset* he made the life of the lowest and backward castes, their relationships with other castes (high, middle) and its consequent impact on society the basis of his next play, *The Underdog.* The play takes a close look at the plight of the low in our society, which is debased by its own bourgeois value system. A harsh indictment of this system, *The Underdog* brings out the role of the self-seeking elite and depicts the reduction of the human values of love, honesty and artistic creativity into commodities of the marketplace. The intellectuals and the political leaders, while paying lip-service,

would let the underdog down, and it is the underdog who has to redeem himself in the end.

Both *Miss X* and *Made for Each Other* deal with urban middle class environment and characters. Paradoxical situations arising in the context of marriage and the burning issue of dowry have been dealt with in a mildly satirical manner in these plays. They take a hard yet hilarious look at the two bleak customs which young people enocunter on their way to matrimony: arranged marriage and dowry. They also show a way out: In *Miss X* an unknown factor puts an end to the bargaining and bidding for dowry, whereas in *Made for Each Other* the prospective couple manage to get out of the unsavory negotiation typical in an arranged marriage by employing innovative ideas. Both these plays have great relevance to the prevailing social customs of our times.

The Professor-playwright in *The Underdog* acknowledges at one place, "Everyone told me that in order to be a modern playwright, one will have to write absurd plays. Therefore, I wrote these..." Was it this desire to become a 'modern playwright' that inspired J P Das to write the *'Absurd Play'*? An analysis of the play, however, may not bear out any such thought.

Time is like a flowing formless authority that engulfs the past, present and future at a given point in itself. It is forever flowing and appears to be moving forward like a whirlpool. Yet, one does not know when and why it comes back and merges with the same starting point. We can talk of stopping it or bringing it back, but practically this is beyond our realm. Mirza Ghalib said, "I am not the time that has gone that I cannot come back." Similarly, in the words of the old man in the play, "You are one big void."

J.P. Das dramatizes this concept of time through the technique of a "play within the play." Amongst the moving hands of the watch and ticking of the clock life seems to be struggling and gasping. It is full of differences of viewpoints of young persons, middle aged and geriatric ones, raising their accusing fingers against each other. As if the Present in the mirror of Future is trying to find out the Past. Cessation of

rhythmic beats is the final destination. This is the frame-work of this play. It seems that since the playwright's basic and serious point of view about time, death and waiting could be enunciated only through the form of the absurd, he wrote his Absurd Play thereby contributing to the on-going new experimentation in Indian theatre.

J.P. Das's last play *Sundardas* is an insightful treatment of the politics of conversion and assumes a special significance in the context of today's hot debate on this issue. *Sundardas* is one of the lesser known sadhus of India. He is little known even in Odisha where he lived and preached in the earlier part of the nineteenth century. His early life is shrouded in mystery, but one can find a wealth of information about his later life from the journals and books by Baptist missionaries. An unusual Sadhu, *Sundardas* had forsaken many of the practices of traditional Hinduism, like idol worship, caste discrimination, exclusion of women from religious practices and so on. It was therefore no surprise that he accepted many Christian precepts from the religious tracts that the missionaries were then distributing. But he disapproved of the way the missionaries exploited the social and economic situation of the common man for conversion. The play dramatizes the strange relationship between the Sadhu and the missionaries since their first meeting in 1922 and the dramatic events that followed. This is the only play of J.P. Das that is based on real events and personalities. Missionaries Bampton, Lacey and Sutton are as much historical as are *Sundardas* and his followers Gangadhar Sarangi, Ramachandra Jachak and others. The story of the confrontation between the Sadhu and the missionaries are based on solid historical records. But the playwright's sympathetic outlook enables him to understand in considerable depth the throes of a great sociological transformation that was taking place.

It is difficult to find a common trait among the plays of J.P. Das as they are very different from each other in subject matter, characterization and treatment. Whereas *Before the Sunset* is a psychological study of 'characters', mainly that of its protagonist, *The Underdog* presents the interaction of 'types' in our society in times of crisis. *Absurd Play* is, well, an absurd play, with 'caricatures' as its

characters and with writing and staging of drama as its theme. *Sundardas* is a conventional historical play, faithful to the events as they happened, but it also highlights, and tries to find an answer to, the immediate questions of religious conflict and proselytisation. Each play stands its own ground as a marker of some of the tensions that disturb the modern man and the contemporary society.

While putting together the plays in this volume, an introduction has been provided before each play and a director's note at the end of each. These will provide the background of the play and give an idea as to how at least one director visualized and staged it. These pieces had been written by writers and theatre persons at different times, but should help to locate and define the texts.

A notable feature in these plays is that they all have a small cast. As the playwright(?) character in *Absurd Play* says, "Every playwright has a repertory in his head.... Shakespeare uses a cast of about twenty characters; Tennessee Williams five or six.... As for myself, I am a playwright who can handle not more than five or six characters." It is as if J.P. Das is talking about himself in these lines. But as Ram Gopal Bajaj says, though with just four characters the presentation and stage setting are very simple and easily done, it is equally difficult since there is no scope for styling the stage and creating an impact with a large cast.

A play's success depends on how the director brings it off on stage. J.P. Das's plays are marvelous reads, but as may be seen from the notes on *Absurd Play* and *Sundardas,* many directors were wary of taking up the plays for production. That they could be very successfully staged vindicates not only the conviction of the directors, who accepted them, but also the inherent strength and possibilities in the plays themselves.

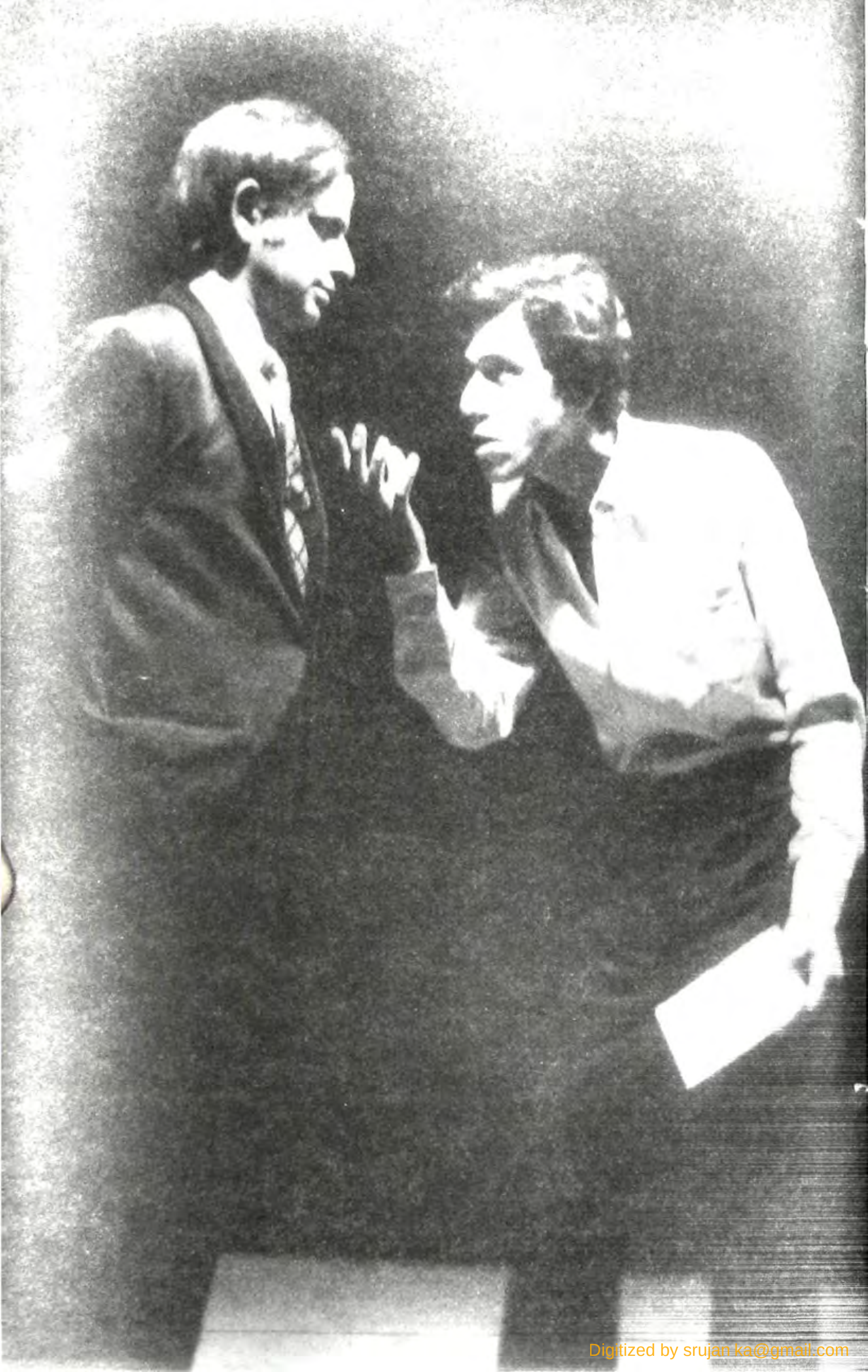
J.P. Das is a versatile writer and his plays are literary works at their best. It is hoped that these works of an important Indian playwright will delight both readers and theatre persons.

Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee

Before the Sunset

Picture overleaf

Sudesh Syal and Om Puri
in *Suryaast* (Hindi)
New Delhi, 1976



Before the Sunset

Introduction

Indira Parthasarathy

Before the Sunset has as its theme a sane schizophrenic, Deepankar, who, having touched the border line of middle age, starts questioning himself whether he has succeeded in life. True, he has all the material comforts; a house, a car, a working wife and a bank balance. But to what end? This is his problem.

He announces a party in his house and invites Saroj, his girlfriend during the pre-marital days, and his boss, Sanjoy. Of course, his wife Sheila is also there and in their presence he decides to speak the truth and nothing but the truth. He imagines that he is stripped of all his inhibitions and gives vent to his feelings, frustration and disgust. He attempts to revive the nostalgic memories, those glorious moments he experienced in the company of Saroj and contrasts them with his present plight—an alienated soul in constant search of his identity. He finds a ready-made enemy of his dreams in Sanjoy, his boss, whom he accuses of having squeezed his 'memories, youth and individuality.'

In Sheila, his wife, to whom he is bound by marriage, he sees the inevitable chains of establishment, from which there is no escape. Seeing them both together as the conspirators who have destroyed his freedom, he finds a vicarious satisfaction in believing that they are making love at his back. He feels irritated by the attitude of his former girlfriend Saroj, who is happy, nicely adjusted to life and which, he feels, is an insult to his ego. Ultimately, he blames her for what he is

now. He has a revolver in his hand, threatening to shoot them all, and Saroj, knowing his psychological inability to put it to use, relieves him of that weapon. From that moment, he feels exhausted and lies on the couch like a deflated balloon.

Deepankar, whose inherited character is forced into an acquired mould becomes eventually a type, instead of an individual. The basic conflict within him of what he wants to be and what he ultimately becomes, results in the wilting of his other psychic functions, which apparently become largely unconscious and in the unconscious exercise an opposing force to the conscious personality. When the conflict reaches the stage of expression, he experiences tension and becomes a neurotic. His outbursts against Sanjoy prove this point. He tells him: "Future generations will one day discover your corpse from under the sales figure files."

He feels cut off from the humanistic past and is yet incapable of integrating with the present. He imagines himself to be a cultured Zombie, a picture which gives him a tragic delight. This problem is perhaps universal in the modern context. It was resolved in those days by seeking shelter in religion, but now it is difficult for an intellectual to belong to God. All of us feel poorly adapted to the new materialism. Existentialism has this anguish that it has to create Man without a blueprint. Everyone is nagged by a hunch that he is forbidden to become his 'Programmatic Patronage'. Deepankar tells his wife: "There is nothing original in this world. It is as if someone has written on the blackboard that you have to live such a life." This is but a sense of defeatism and as such, Deepankar represents all our impotent rebels in a capitalistic society, beating their luminous wings in the void.

Deepankar's life is marked by glorious inaction as he allows himself to be pushed by circumstances into becoming what he is now and all his protests rest only on his verbiage. He cries in vain: "I have spent fifteen long years of my life in the air-conditioned room of your office. A small room into which nothing enters except sales figures. A room devoid of the light of the sun, the colours of the sky and the fragrance of the breeze. Fifteen years of my life! When I entered the

room, I was young. I had hopes and ambitions. I used to write poetry then." When Sanjoy tells him that he has a revolver in his hand instead of poems, Deepankar retorts that fifteen years can turn poems into revolvers! At this point, Sanjoy becomes a critic unwittingly and remarks: "I hope it is not loaded."

This may be true of Deepankar's poems also. He is not passionately devoted to anything except to himself. Even if he had opted for being a poet, instead of a reluctant business executive, he would have written only mediocre poems, in which case, his personal tragedy would have been more intense. Saroj in the trial scene asks him "Have you ever been in love, except with yourself?"

Saroj is a balanced character in this play. To her "a flower is beautiful anywhere, whether it is in the park or in the button hole." She feels that nothing can be comprehended through definitions. She has reconciled herself to the fact that life could be sometimes a wedding and sometimes a funeral procession. She enjoys being in the sessions of silent secret thoughts, remembering things past, but is not lost in them. She has a value for everything that helps her discover her identity.

Sheila is an average middle brow intellectual who wants companionship in wedlock, though not love. But she does not seem to be utterly disappointed that even this is denied her, experiencing that even this is two worlds on the same bed. It does not lead her to withdraw to herself but she escapes into her job and starts doting on her son that gives her comfort. Deepankar's question, 'can the flowers of the park wear saries?' is amended by her when she puts the question back to him, 'can saris wear the flowers of the park?', which sums up her attitude towards life.

Sanjoy, Deepankar's boss is a typical philistine who knows what he wants and gets it. He has no regrets in life. He is shocked by Deepankar's introspection and asks him, "Aren't you happy in your job? Ours is a reputed firm—good salary, bonus, prospects of promotion. What more can one ask?" Perhaps even he is affected by Deepankar's malady, as evidenced by his visualisation of Deepankar

committing suicide. He indulges in the luxury of dramatization that does not befit his character. Sheila wants him to imagine something romantic and Sanjoy is also prepared for it. Maybe that Sanjoy and Sheila are made for each other, a marriage of establishment with philistinism.

Each character in this play is an intellectual abstraction that lends it its vitality. It is structurally well-knit and the trial scene has the power and logic of an absurd theatre. Each tries to mentally strip the other and all of them are finally revealed as they are.

Before the Sunset
Cast: Deepankar, Sanjoy, Sheila and Saroj

Act One

Deepankar: Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I am Deepankar. Some of you may be knowing me already. I am quite well up in the social set up in this city. I am Number Two in my office. I have got a house, a car, a working wife, and a bank balance. You may be finding it rather odd that I should be telling you all these at the start of the play. But you will see for yourself later how important this introduction is. I might as well tell you that the whole thing started from a New Year's Greeting Card. I had received it from Saroj on the first of January. Don't you worry, I will introduce you to Saroj soon. The message on the card read:

Wishing you
Peace and Love
Joy and Success
And also wishing you
All that you wish for yourself

The card suddenly assumed some significance for me; not because it was from Saroj, but because of the message. Saroj had wished me all that I wanted for myself. When I got the card, I started thinking: what really was it that I wanted for myself; what exactly was the aim of my life?

There was a time when I had no doubts in my mind about this. Would you believe what I wanted? I wanted to become a theatre man. I was then living with Shaw, Ibsen, Ionesco and Brecht. I wanted the stage to become a part of my life. But then what happened? I took my Law degree and joined the bar for some time; and then I became an

Executive of a Company. You perhaps think that this is a very common thing. One who wanted to be a poet became a clerk; he who wanted to be a doctor became a policeman. I had a friend who did not want to be any of these. He used to write poetry and wanted to become moonlight. Someone became a lawyer instead of a doctor; someone became a businessman instead of a poet. But this friend of mine, he could not become moonlight ... he is now in the lunatic asylum. Well, that's that. I am here before you this evening for a very special reason. It is my birthday today. And it is a special birthday for me, for I will be completing forty years.

Those of you who have not touched this border line of middle age will not understand the horrors of this age. At this turning point of your age, everything in your life changes. Your hair become grey. Your nerves become weak. Your waist line expands. Everybody loses faith in you. Your own self-confidence gets shaken. You are afraid of heart-attack and have by this time already taken the first E.C.G. Your daughter is growing up and you are becoming conscious of her virginity. Whatever personal ambitions and aims you had, which you believed you would achieve one day, you discover suddenly are beyond your reach. The evening of your life has started. It is now only a waiting for the nightfall.

This evening of one's life is also a kind of challenge. At this juncture one tries to hold back the last flicker of the sunshine. You might have come across the news item about the middle-aged bank clerk, who did his regular turn in the office for twenty years and led an ideal family life, but one fine morning he resigned his job, re-married and vanished from the city. Take Paul Gauguin. Suddenly one day, he left his home and went far away to pursue his painting. I have arrived at such a crucial moment; I have to take the momentous decision today; this very day. Before I am forty. If I let this day slip by, I will get lost in my daily existence. The sun will set, and the rest of my life will only be one long night.

I wish to take this decision before you all today, for I always loved the stage. I want, therefore, that you should all be witness to the most important moment of my life. Now, do have a look at my stage.

Deepankar *claps, the curtain lifts and the stage inside is seen*

This was my living room. I have rearranged it for today. There is in this room only an office desk, a couch and a park bench. These symbolise the three facets of my life.

Let me now introduce you to my cast. Sanjoy—*(He calls* Sanjoy)

Sanjoy *comes and shakes hands with him and says: 'Hello,* Deepankar'

Hi Boss. *(To the audience)* This is Sanjoy. My Boss. The Number One in my office. And unfortunately my friend, too. He has had uninterrupted command over me for the last fifteen years. He has a good reputation in our Company, and quite popular in the social circle, too. Being unmarried, he is specially popular among the other sex. The Ladies' Man.

Sanjoy *smiles and goes over to the office desk*

Sheila—*(He calls* Sheila)

Sheila *comes and says: 'what is it now'?*

This is Sheila, my wife. My better half for fifteen long years. From the time I brought her home, she has been holding the key to my life. She is also the Principal of the Women's College here.

Sheila *goes over and sits on the couch*

Saroj—*(He calls, but when she does not appear)* Rose, Rose. (Saroj *comes and says:* 'My name is Saroj, not Rose') O.K. Saroj; call a Rose by any other name. This is Saroj. My friend for twenty years.

Saroj: Nineteen years.

Deepankar: All right, If you wish, I can tell you exactly how many years, how many months, how many days and how many hours. I remember exactly when I met you for the first time.

(Saroj *sits on the park bench.* Deepankar *tells the audience)* I've something to tell you. *(He then touches the switchboard. The stage becomes dark, leaving only a spot of light on* Deepankar) Whatever I said about them was only apparently so. For me, they have different characters. Looking at them, you cannot imagine that they only are the ones responsible for my present state. I would like to make them pay for this.

Deepankar *touches the switch and the light focuses on* Sanjoy *who is turning the pages of a file and is dialling.*

This is my boss Sanjoy. Much my inferior in education and intelligence. And that is perhaps why he tries to boss over me all the time and is rude to me before others. But I cannot do a thing. He has a very good reputation in the Company. He gets all the credit for the rising curve of sales which is due to my efforts. And besides, I think he has by now become quite close to Sheila. I think I will some day shoot this fellow.

The light next falls on Sheila, *who is reading a magazine and buffing her nails*

This is my good wife Sheila. I think Sheila has married me only for her social security. She is from a rich family; she gets a good salary; but she too needs a social crutch. She needs a husband like me to drive the car, take her to the cinema, call the doctor when she is ill, and to order him about in the presence of friends. So this is Sheila, who has only demands on me. Demand on my time, on my cheque book, demand on my body. She is a symbol of exploitation for me.

The light now falls on Saroj *who is busy knitting a sweater*

Women's loving is like a fire; whoever it touches gets burnt. I think Saroj will burn me down to ashes. I know her for twenty years, but I suppose she had known me for centuries, and had me marked out. I became a different person after knowing her. The first twenty years of my life were blotted out. My whole universe changed after I got to know her. My friends, my parents, my surroundings, all became unreal for me. Only Saroj remained the reality.

Saroj has enveloped me like a sweater from which I have no escape. But I cannot bear this torture of love any longer. I have decided to escape from this fire.

Deepankar *becomes quieter. There is silence, but for his heavy breathing.* Saroj *comes over to him. The stage gets lighted.* Sanjoy *and* Sheila *too join him.* Deepankar *becomes conscious of the surrounding, and tries to regain control of the situation*

Do sit down. I am going to tell you why I have invited you here today.

Sheila: Everyone knows it is your birthday today.

Sanjoy: At the right time, I will say 'Happy Birthday' and will give you my small present.

Deepankar: Oh no. This is not an ordinary birthday. This is my fortieth birthday. And this day is very significant for me.

Sanjoy: Are you planning something special, instead of lighting forty candles?

Deepankar: I have something important to tell you today.

Sanjoy: Some Birthday Resolution? Like giving up drinks for twenty-four hours?

Deepankar: No, it is not something so commonplace as that. I am going to do something which will give a new turn to my life.

Sheila: Let me come back from the hostel; we will listen to you while you cut the birthday cake.

Deepankar: You can't be going away now. Not on my birthday.

Sheila: I have to go, but I'll be back in no time.

Deepankar: You want to desert me at this important moment of my life?

Sheila: I will be away just for a few minutes. *(Satirically)* You will find me beside you at that momentous time. When you cut the cake, I will pass on the knife to you.

Deepankar: *(In anger)* The revolver may be, not the knife.

Sheila: Give me the car keys.

Deepankar: *(Holds on to the briefcase)* No. You will not leave the house today. You will listen to me at least for today.

Sheila: I have got urgent work.

Deepankar: Just today; for tomorrow will be a new day, and everything will be different.

Sheila: You need not talk in riddles. I must go.

Sanjoy: Why don't you stay back, Sheila, when Deepankar is so insistent?

Sheila: No. Give me the keys.

Sheila *extends her hand for the keys.* Deepankar *holds back. The situation becomes tense.* Sanjoy *does not know what to do.* Saroj *comes to his rescue.*

Saroj: *(To* Sanjoy) Please go and reach Sheila to her hostel.

Deepankar is *about* to *object, but keeps quiet.* Sanjoy is *happy to escape from the situation.* Sheila *looks at* Deepankar *and* Saroj *and goes out with* Sanjoy.

Deepankar: Did you notice what sort of domestic life I am going through?

Saroj: This is a necessary part of married life. But you should have given the car keys to Sheila.

Deepankar: But why? Is it because she owns the car fifty per cent.

Saroj: Not everything can be measured by percentages.

Deepankar: But Sheila has got everything measured. Fifty per cent in everything. In me, in my whole personality, in my briefcase.

Saroj: What have you got in the briefcase that you are holding on to it?

Deepankar: *(Putting the briefcase on the table)* What do you mean? The briefcase is me. Look at my name on it. Sometimes, I feel it is not my name, it is the name of the briefcase, and I am only carrying it. *(Opens it)* Car keys, Cheque book, proofs of our social standing, Passport. The validity will expire in three months, but I have not been able to go abroad. Car licence, key for the locker. I have forgotten what exactly is there in the locker, but whenever I look at the key, I feel it is not the key for a locker, it is the key to my security itself. Insurance policy, sustenance for an uncertain future. Deed of our house. Diners' Club card. Revolver licence. And the house keys.

Saroj: What more do you want? You have got everything that one wants. Anybody will be jealous of such a briefcase.

Deepankar: That is not correct, Saroj, that is absolutely wrong. Nobody is jealous about a black briefcase. He becomes jealous to see his dreams come true in another person's life. Jealousy is a relative thing. Can you believe that I was once jealous of one of my employees? I had some urgent work and had gone to pick him up from his house. He came out of the house and got into the car with me after speaking to his wife who was standing outside. I do not know what he

said, but in that moment, I could feel that they love each other very dearly. I do not know why I had this feeling. Maybe it was something in his wife's eyes, or the way she was standing. But I did become very jealous of this man that day. Jealous of my own subordinate. And I started being rude to him from that day.

Saroj: I think love always remained a mystery for you.

(Deepankar *becomes inattentive, and starts playing with a packet of papers in the briefcase)* Whatever happened to you? (Deepankar *keeps quiet)* What are the papers in your hand?

Deepankar: These are the charters of my liberty. Passport to my freedom.

Saroj: What liberty? Freedom from whom?

Deepankar: From myself ... from the confines of this briefcase.

Well, let's leave that alone. Do you know, I thought you won't come.

Saroj: That's a lie. You very well knew that I would come. Or else you would not have asked me to come.

Deepankar: Does your husband know that you are coming here? (Saroj *keeps quiet)* What lies did you tell him? And to your daughter?

Saroj: Now tell me why you asked me to come.

Deepankar: Have patience. I will speak only when all of you are here.

Saroj: What would you say that needed such a dramatic arrangement?

Deepankar: This is no drama. It is the real thing of my life. I want to prove today that whatever has happened in my life so far was only a bad dream. What you are seeing of me now is not the real me. I was an angel. When I fell on the earth, I was burdened with a carcass on my shoulder, and that dead body is Deepankar. For years, I have been carrying my burden from city to city, from desert to desert. I will intern the corpse today, and from the grave will sprout a spring. I will become an angel again.

Saroj: You always had a fascination for dramatics. You are now talking as if this is a studio floor and unseen movie cameras are

working around you. Once you were thinking of going in for the theatre, isn't it?

Deepankar: Yes, but it never happened that way. When I had decided to give up everything to dedicate myself to the stage, I got the appointment letter of this Company. I had many responsibilities, and had to take this job.

Saroj: What responsibilities? Others' responsibilities or your own security? Or is it that you always wanted such a life only.

Deepankar: Even you misunderstand me, Saroj. I think my life will come to an end, but no one will understand me.

Saroj: Had I not understood you, I would not have accepted your strange invitation to come here.

Deepankar: Did you come out of sympathy for me?

Saroj: I think it is you who never understood me.

Deepankar: Is not understanding each other love? Didn't someone say that a long time back? Did you tell me that? Or is it I who had told you? Do you mean to say I never loved you?

Saroj: Love needs courage. Cowards cannot fall in love. All right, before they return, please tell me why you asked me to come.

Deepankar: If I say, come, let's leave everything and go away ...

Saroj: Aren't you forgetting that you had already said this several years back? You were younger then, lean and hungry looking. You had come out of the University; the future was uncertain, but romantic for you. You did not have a briefcase in your hand then. I was only a girl of eighteen. I had just given up wearing frocks for sari. I was inexperienced; and trusted everybody. I liked reading romances, and loved dreaming. For me the whole universe was full of colours. You remember what I had told you then? Do you remember?

Deepankar: Leave it alone, Saroj. I am tired today. It is the tiredness of many years, and of the many failures of my life. Sit by my side, please.

Both sit on the park bench. Saroj *puts her hand on* Deepankar's

Saroj: I am sorry. I did not mean to hurt you.

Deepankar: You are perhaps thinking that the decision I could not take eighteen years back cannot be taken even today. Is that so?

Saroj: Let's forget it. Now tell me about yourself. Of your eighteen years.

Deepankar: I am eighteen years older. I think I will go on ageing like this, and will die before I can keep my promises. I am now afraid of death. I am reminded of death when I am alone by the seaside, when I look at the skies, when I hear the temple bells. I think, he who does not know how to live dreads death most. For me death has many faces: invalid passport, bank overdraft, insurance policy with overdue instalments, empty locker. Look at me. I am sitting beside you, but I am conscious that I am getting on in age. I am telephoning and getting five minutes older. I am talking to you, but my years are adding on with each tick of the clock. I am getting bald, my waist line is expanding, and my muscles are slackening.

Saroj: You are doing your best though to keep young.

Deepankar: That's right. I am dyeing my hair. I am taking tonics. I am careful about my dress.

Saroj: But to what end are your rejuvenation efforts?

Deepankar: I am beaten. I console myself that I have been able to keep my body and mind young. But when I look at the mirror, I know what the truth is. You see my eyes? I cannot deceive them. They tell me from inside the mirror: all your efforts to stay young have gone waste.

Saroj: We are getting into a serious discussion. Tell me about your domestic life. How is Babloo?

Deepankar: He is in Darjeeling. He is going on sixteen. He should be a little older than your daughter. When Babloo was with us I thought he was my future, and the only object of my life was to look after him. But what is it now that he is away? A letter once a week. Holidays once a year. He is only another sign of my increasing age.

Saroj: Children can be a bridge in domestic relationship. I cannot think of my family life without my children.

Deepankar: You are perhaps thinking of Sheila and me. I also thought that Babloo will be a bridge to bring us together. But between me and Sheila, it was not a stream to be spanned. There was the

expanse of the seven seas between us. A turbulent sea in which Babloo was drowned like a small boat.

Saroj: That is very cynical.

Deepankar: Eighteen years is a long time. A gap of a whole generation. I was happy eighteen years back. All my ambition was only to get a letter from you. Life was a waiting from one letter to another.

Saroj: Why did it all change?

Deepankar: Because all dreams have to come to an end.

Saroj: Do you think it was only a dream.

Deepankar: I tell myself that it was not a dream. But I know that is not true. I held my future in my hands. I could have achieved whatever I wanted. From the cross-road, I could have walked to any destination. But I let the future slip between my fingers. I stayed on at the crossroad. But Why?

Saroj: Maybe because you were a coward.

Deepankar: I think you are right. It is a sin to be a coward. But I'm going to propitiate for my sin today.

Saroj: *(To lighten the situation)* If you are thinking of getting initiated by some Swamiji, you could have informed me in a letter.

Deepankar: No, it is a much more important decision I am going to take.

Saroj: Please tell me now what you have to say. I can still make the last train.

Deepankar: Let them come back. All of you are involved with my decision. You must stay till the end.

Saroj: You know that having come, I am going to stay.

Deepankar: But why did you come? To prove your generosity towards me?

Saroj: It's not such an unusual thing to accept an invitation for a birthday party.

Deepankar: But it is my birthday. What if your husband ... it may bring unhappiness in your domestic life.

Saroj: I see, you understand all that. If you thought of it, pray tell me why you asked me to come.

Deepankar: Maybe, I am selfish. But I will always consider myself responsible if this brings unhappiness in your life. Do tell me, are you happy? Are you content in life?

Saroj: If I say yes?

Deepankar: What is the definition of happiness? What is the definition of peace? What is the definition of love?

Saroj: You don't have to comprehend everything through definitions.

Deepankar: But what have I not done to comprehend it? For realising peace, I have read scriptures, I've gone to temples and brothels, and have taken to drinking. Volumes of books, bottles of drinks and mountains of flesh—nothing could lead me to that definition. I find my life shortening, but I am as far away from the comprehension of peace, love and happiness as I ever was. I think I will now have to use the gun.

Saroj: You are unnecessarily getting excited. (Deepankar *is tense. He takes a small bottle, .from his pocket and swallows a pill. He becomes calm. He had stood up, but now goes back to sit near* Saroj) Tranquilliser?

Deepankar: Yes.

Saroj: Are you taking these regularly? What does the doctor say?

Deepankar: The doctor has forbidden, but I can't help it.

Saroj: But why?

Deepankar *takes out a pill from the bottle and shows it to her*

Deepankar: Why do you go to the temple? To the theatre? To the fair? Why do people drink? Why do people dream? Look at this small pill. Miles of snow, and moonlight on the white expanse of it. It is nightfall. *(He turns round the pill)* Look at the other side—the unending ocean, and the limitless beach. Waves after waves after waves. There is nothing here except the feeble wail of the dying surf. *(He puts it to her ear)* Listen, night descends now. Everything is getting quiet. Only the ding dong of the temple bells. From far and far away, only the jingle is floating back.

Absentminded, Deepankar *takes the other pill also. All is quiet. The park bench gets flooded in blue light.* Deepankar *is now completely calm.*

Do you remember when we met for the first time?

Saroj: Yes.

Deepankar: I do not remember your birthday, but I do remember the date of our first meeting. You were born for me that day. 31st July, college library.

Saroj: No, not the library. It was on the lawn outside.

Deepankar: Who was it who introduced us? I do not remember. I remember nothing. I remember only you.

Saroj: It was only for a short time. I was in a hurry to go to the class.

Deepankar: Then we met again. After quite some time.

Saroj: 20th August. I was coming out of the cinema hall.

Deepankar: Your inseparable friend was also there with you. I wanted to talk to you, but it was not to be.

Saroj: You had many friends with you. There was also a small girl. She had a blue frock on and was holding your hand.

The telephone on *the office desk rings and* Deepankar *lifts it*

Deepankar: Yes, Deepankar here. I know. I got the file with me. Yes, I will remember. Eight in the morning. All right. Thank you. *(He walks back from the phone to the park bench)* Everything would be changed between tonight and tomorrow morning. Let us now swim back twenty years on time's ocean.

Saroj: But that is impossible.

Deepankar: No, We have now reached the cinema hall, you see. It is drizzling outside. We are waiting for a taxi.

Saroj: The girl is crying for ice-cream.

Deepankar: Suddenly you got into a taxi and left.

Saroj: And then?

Deepankar: We are now swimming.

Saroj: Do you see the light house?

Deepankar: Far away. We are only tossing about in the waves. Then we met for the third time.

Saroj: Third, fourth, fifth time. Many encounters.

Deepankar: And many waitings.

Saroj: And then my holidays came. I stayed back in the hostel.

Deepankar: I met you in your hostel. But before that I had received your letter.

Saroj: You came exactly at three.

Deepankar: When I arrived, you were in the visitors' room knitting a sweater. You remember what is the first thing you told me? '1 did not think you will come'. You remember what I said?

Saroj: 'Instead of three O'clock in the hostel, if you had asked me to meet you in the tiger's cage in the zoo at 12 in the night, I would have come.'

Deepankar: The clock tower struck three at this time. You adjusted your watch. It was three minutes late. After some silence, I said, 'Come, let's go out'. After saying that I hesitated, for I had not thought of where we could go. But you said, 'Let's go'. I said, 'Where to?'

Saroj: Anywhere. River bank, park, coffee house.

Deepankar: It might rain now.

Saroj: Then a movie.

Deepankar: It's late for the show.

Saroj: We can see the movie halfway. Will you stand up? (Deepankar *stands up;* Saroj *takes his measurements for the sweater)* No, this is not for you. It is for my brother, who is of your build.

Deepankar: Oh. Then it rained. It rained heavily. We could not go out that day.

Saroj: You were relieved. But then some days later you came and asked me to go out with you.

Deepankar: River bank, park, movies, coffee house.

Saroj: Many short encounters.

Deepankar: Many small talks.

Saroj: Restless waitings.

Deepankar: And all of a sudden, rains. *(Both remain quiet for some time)* You remember the restaurant we were sitting in when I asked you if you believed in God.

Saroj: At that time, there was a procession on the road outside. I

said it must be a wedding procession. When we looked out, we discovered that it was a funeral procession.

Deepankar: You said that you believed in destiny.

Saroj: And then?

Deepankar: We just ordered coffee.

Some more quiet

Many such moments. Many such days. And many such years.

Saroj: Many a chit-chat, and many a misunderstanding.

Deepankar: And then understanding each other. I discovered, my life had turned a full circle. I had a goal in life.

Saroj: Was not that unreal?

Deepankar: No; it was all very real for me. The touch of the first love was my life's fulfilment. To be near someone was life's goal. House was where the park bench was.

Saroj: Wasn't it just like this bench?

Deepankar: No; it was a rickety old one. Broken at one corner.

Saroj *looks at the bench, and moves closer to* Deepankar, *as if the corner was broken. She puts her hand on* Deepankar's

Saroj: There was a tree near the bench. You used to hang your coat on one of the broken branches. (Deepankar *takes off his coat and puts it on the bench.* Saroj *puts her hand* on Deepankar's *sweater)* Twenty years is a long time.

Deepankar: You were wearing a pink sari that day. I noticed that all the girls of the city had pink dresses. Including the roses in the park. I thought you would not come, for the newspapers had that morning reported a murder near the park.

Saroj: But I did come in time.

Deepankar: You had a packet in your hand, and it had this sweater.

Saroj: It was you who arrived late, I was wondering if you would come at all.

Deepankar: You know why I was late.

Saroj: Your Professor had died of heart failure. But looking at you it was difficult to know.

Deepankar: That is because I never had any sentiments about death.

Saroj: I think you never had any sentiments about anything.

Deepankar: You remember what you had asked me then?

Saroj: Let's forget it.

Deepankar: *(In agitated voice)* You asked me: 'Have you ever been in love'? You remember what I said?

Saroj: Leave it alone please.

Deepankar: I said. 'What is the definition of love'?

Saroj *puts her hand on* Deepankar's *shoulder*

Saroj: It's late; let us go inside.

They both get up and walk towards the couch. Light comes on the couch, revealing Sheila *sitting there.* Sheila *looks at them.* Saroj *goes back to the park bench.*

Deepankar: You returned rather early.

Sheila: I had to. It is your birthday today, a special birthday, and you are going to perform a miracle. We are all eagerly waiting for the miracle.

Deepankar: Where is Sanjoy?

Sheila: He dropped me and went to the club.

Deepankar: Club? But he has to be here.

Sheila: Don't worry, he will come back soon. Ring up the club if you like. There is a big party in the club.

Deepankar: You also wanted to go to the club, didn't you?

Sheila: You can read my mind, I see.

Deepankar: I have never been curious about your mind.

Sheila: Have you ever been curious about me? What I do, what I think, who I go out with? Have you ever been interested to know?

Deepankar: Do you think I should be prying into your personal life? I think suspicion is the greatest bane of married life. If two people staying together cannot understand each other...

Sheila: But that would be love.

Deepankar: What do you know about love? You only know suspicion. You know jealousy. Women are really strange creatures.

Either they love, or they hate. Liking or else complete disregard. We have been married for fifteen years. What did we get out of it?

Sheila: What did you want out of marriage that you did not get?

Deepankar: I got married since one has to marry. I did not expect anything out of marriage, the same way as I did not expect anything out of life itself.

Sheila: Why then the regret?

Deepankar: What did you want out of marriage?

Sheila: At least some companionship, if not love. What did I get? An existence where there are walls and walls. Two worlds on the same bed. *(The telephone rings.* Sheila *gets up to take the phone.* Deepankar *stops her. The phone rings for some time and then stops).* It could be an important call.

Deepankar: There is nothing important for me today. I do not want to recognise any truth except myself.

Sheila: Please come to me. Why are you always so formal towards me?

Deepankar: Where do you think the call was from? Could it be from the office?

Sheila: That you will find out tomorrow.

Deepankar: Could be from the office. *(He goes to the telephone and dials. There is no reply and he comes back to* Sheila) There is no reply. No one in the office.

Sheila: Babloo's letter has come today. (*She takes out the letter from her bag*).

Deepankar: Has it?

Sheila: Won't you like to read it? He has written many funny things.

Deepankar: You perhaps do not know that the teachers write these letters on the blackboard and all the children copy them and post them home. All parents get similar letters with many funny things from their children.

Sheila: Whatever it is, it is after all Babloo who has written to us.

Deepankar: You are right. This is true of all the love letters that get written. They too are no one's original writing. These are either

from some famous book or copied from the dialogue of some film hero. (Deepankar *does not take the letter and* Sheila *puts it back in her bag)*

If you analyse, you will find that there is nothing original in this world. It is as if someone has written down on the blackboard that you have to live such a life, and we all do live such a life. Sometimes I feel that my life would have been no different if I had married someone else.

Sheila: But why did you marry me?

Deepankar: You know the circumstances.

Sheila: If you had wanted ...

Deepankar: If only I had wanted, I could have done many things. I could have touched the sky, I could have held the sun, moon and stars in my hands. Had I wanted, I could have become moonlight. I think I can, even today, do something I want. Only today. (Deepankar *had got up while talking. He now sits down tired)* The pain in my head has started.

Sheila: *(Touches his forehead)* You should consult a doctor; I have been repeatedly telling you.

Deepankar: No, it will be all right now. (Saroj *comes and gives him a tablet from her bag)*

Sheila: What tablet?

Saroj: Aspirin. For headache.

Sheila: Oh, my God! It took me fifteen years to find out.

To call a headache a pain inside the head is perhaps Deepankar's way of speaking.

Sanjoy *enters. All the lights go on*

Sanjoy: Let's go to the club. Wonderful party there.

The club is overflowing. This is no time to sit here.

Deepankar: Today is my birthday.

Sanjoy: Let's be done with your birthday quick, and then we go to the club. I want to win all the prizes in the party games today.

Deepankar: Forget the club and listen to me, please.

Sanjoy: I must go back. I have a bet to settle.

Deepankar: Can't you keep away from the club just one day?

Sanjoy: All right. Do start your birthday. You are supposed to

perform a miracle today, isn't it? Let's have the miracle. It's getting delayed.

Deepankar: Nothing will get delayed today. I have stopped the sun on its tracks. The sun does not set until I have had my resurrection.

Sanjoy: Wonderful dialogue *(he claps his hands).* Let's have a drink on this.

Deepankar: Club, drink, party games. Can't you stay away from these even for a day?

(Sanjoy *goes to the telephone)* How simple is life for some people. Office and club, club and office. No problems, no complications. Air-conditioned office, air-conditioned bar. File and *chota* peg. Small lives are being measured into small pegs and these people are downing them unhesitatingly.

Sanjoy *says* 'Just a minute, Deepankar', *and* Deepankar *goes to him.*

Sanjoy: You have got the sales figures file with you? Do bring the file to the office tomorrow.

Deepankar: I refuse to discuss official matters with you now. This is my house, not the office.

Sanjoy: Well. Well.

Deepankar: And in this house, I am Number One. Not you.

Sanjoy: The Managing Director is coming tomorrow.

So ...

Deepankar: For heaven's sake Sanjoy, stop telling me about the office, I have spent fifteen long years of my life in the air-conditioned room of your office. A small room into which nothing enters except sales figures. A room devoid of the light of the sun, colours of the sky and the fragrance of the breeze. Fifteen years of my life. When I entered the room, I was young. I had hopes and ambitions. I used to write poetry then. Will you see the poems I wrote?

Deepankar *looks in the table drawers. When he pulls out his hand and opens his fingers, there is a revolver in it.*

Sanjoy: Look, you got the revolver instead of your poems.

Deepankar: That is right. Fifteen years can turn poems into revolvers.

Sanjoy: I hope it is not loaded.

Deepankar *breaks it open, looks inside and says:* 'loaded' *and puts it in his pocket*

Deepankar: In fifteen years, you squeezed everything out of me. My memories, my dreams, my youth, my individuality.

Sanjoy: You are forgetting the compensation. You are getting a fat salary. You got a house. A car. Security. All thanks to our Company. God bless our Company.

Deepankar: Salary, house, car, security. Is life confined to these only?

Sanjoy: What else do you want in life?

Deepankar: Tell me about yourself. You are the top man in our office. Have you achieved all that you wanted?

Sanjoy: I do not know what I wanted, but I am quite happy. I have no regrets.

Deepankar: I think it is only the morons who are happy.

Sanjoy: Stop your philosophy, please. Aren't you happy in your job? Ours is a reputed firm. Good salary. Bonus. Prospects of promotion. What more can one ask for?

Deepankar: You won't understand, for you have no salvation. You will rust away in your office room. You will not see the light of the sun, nor see the colour of the sky. Future generations will one day discover your corpse from under the sales figure files.

Sanjoy: That's ghastly talk.

Deepankar: Nothing is more ghastly than the bare truth. When I expose the truth before you, you will find how grim it is.

Sanjoy: I think you are having the strain of work. Why don't you take some leave?

Deepankar: You have now started acting the benevolent boss.

Sanjoy: Well, I'm serious. I may have to force you to go on leave. And I have a surprise for you too.

Deepankar: What do you all want to prove? That you are a generous boss? Sheila an ideal wife? Saroj a suffering friend? I think you are all using me as an instrument to display your goodness.

Sanjoy: You are going soft in the head.

Deepankar: You are all selfish. Whatever you have told me were all lies.

The telephone rings. Deepankar *does not attend to it. He stops* Sanjoy *going to the telephone.*

Sanjoy: You should have taken the call. Could be from the Office.

Deepankar: You are not only a slave of your Company, you are a slave of the telephone too. For you it is a little black god. Do you know what I feel like sometimes? I want to hang myself with the telephone cords.

They all gather round Deepankar.

Sheila: Let me now get the cake.

Sanjoy: I should also be getting along now. We could all go to the club.

Saroj: I can even now catch the last train.

Deepankar: Nobody leaves now. You have to stay on till your trial is over and I have handed down the verdict.

Sanjoy: What trial?

Deepankar: You have all conspired to destroy me.

Sanjoy: Stop this nonsense, please.

Deepankar: I am the judge. I will try you for your crimes. I have no peace till I punish you all. You may now confess in your own interest. *(They all want to go to their respective places)* No one makes a move. I will give you exactly ten minutes. I have got full-proof evidence against each one of you. You have no escape today. *(He gestures dramatically at his briefcase)* All the evidence is in there.

They all gather round the briefcase on the table. All lights go off except the one on Deepankar. *He now speaks to the audience*

See, how scared they are. They know that their guilt will be proved, beyond doubt. But do you think they will confess? They will think over it, and counsel among themselves. But I know they will not confess. I will have to go through the trial.

Deepankar *leaves the stage.*

Curtain

Act Two

When the curtain rises after ten minutes, the three are still standing around the briefcase. They now go back to their respective places. Sheila *looks at her watch*

Sheila: It is already ten minutes. Where is Deepankar?

Sanjoy: I am going to confess. (Sheila *and* Saroj *look at him amused)* Ten minutes gone and I am going to confess of my own free will. I, Sanjoy, of sound mind, confess that it was a terrible mistake on my part to have come here. I also confess that never before had I attended such a birthday party. I also vow that never again shall I attend such a party in future.

Sheila: *(Raises her hand as if in oath)* I, Sheila Deepankar, swear in the name of God that all this was Deepankar's doing. I did not have an inkling of this.

Sanjoy: Many thanks. Should not the accused now be honourably acquitted? And may I leave, please?

Saroj: Deepankar should be coming now. When we have waited for so long ...

Sanjoy: The ten minutes are up. The court should adjourn now.

Sheila: If you leave now, you will be guilty of contempt.

Sanjoy: I will wait for just five more minutes.

Sheila: What do we do now?

Sanjoy: I wish I had gone to the club. They are having wonderful party games.

Sheila: Why don't we play some games?

Sanjoy: Let's have a guessing game. Let's guess what Deepankar proposes doing today. *(To* Sheila) Your guess?

Sheila: I think—well, it is a game, and we could imagine something really absurd, I suppose. I think Deepankar will renounce the world and become a *Sannyasin.*

Sanjoy: The other day I had seen a book with him—'Life after Death'. Do you think he will call himself Swami Deepankar Saraswati?

Sheila: Will you take initiation from him?

Sanjoy: Only if he can perform the miracle of walking on water.

Sheila: What do you think Deepankar wants to do?

Sanjoy: He might be planning to oust me and take my place in the company.

Sheila: Or to divorce me.

Sanjoy: Or suicide. Just to know what happens after death.

Sheila: He won't commit suicide. He will commit '*harakiri*'. He always had a flare for the theatrical. He might be thinking he is the last *samurai.*

Sanjoy: Didn't he mention about hanging himself with the telephone cord?

Sheila: How ghastly!

Sanjoy: One could commit suicide by taking an overdose of sleeping pills.

Sheila: Deepankar has a bottle of sleeping pills in his pocket.

Sanjoy: He also has a loaded revolver in his pocket.

Sheila: He will choose that which is more dramatic.

Sanjoy: Any suicide can be made to appear dramatic.

Sheila: How so?

Sanjoy: Take sleeping pills, for instance. Deepankar takes an overdose and in the morning people find him asleep, his face absolutely composed and peaceful. He has the telephone in one hand, as if he was just talking to someone. In the other hand he is holding a copy of 'Life after Death'.

Or take the revolver. We are all standing before him. Deepankar delivers a short speech on life and death, and holds the revolver to his head. We are unable to do anything as the face explodes. And then blood on the carpet.

Saroj: Stop it, please. What a macabre imagination! Sheila, let's think of something romantic.

Sanjoy: I'm sure there are neighbours with nubile daughters around here. Deepankar elopes with such a girl. And in an unknown houseboat in the lakes of Kashmir, they sign a suicide pact.

Sheila: Oh no; not suicide again.

Sanjoy: Sorry. Deepankar divorces his wife of fifteen years and marries this sixteen-year old girl. Then they go over to Kashmir for honeymoon.

Sheila: See where we have landed. From renunciation of the world and *Sannyas* to a second marriage.

Saroj: I think there is not much of a difference between the two. Both are forms of escape.

Sanjoy: *(To* Saroj) What do you think Deepankar wants to do?

Saroj: Nothing.

Sheila: Oh, No. Do guess something. This is after all a game.

Saroj: I think Deepankar will only keep on dreaming.

Sheila: What dreams?

Saroj: He will dream that he has become a bird and would want to fly out to the skies.

Sheila: Will he be able to fly away?

Saroj: No.

Sheila: Why can't he do it even in a dream?

Saroj: Because he had barred all the windows before dreaming.

The situation becomes rather sullen

Sanjoy: Deepankar said, the evidence is in the briefcase. What could it mean?

Sheila: It is the bag he takes to the office. What could be in there? *(She opens the briifcase and looks inside)* Cheque book, passport, car licence, insurance policy, revolver licence...

Sanjoy: Is there the file for tomorrow's meeting?

Sheila: No. Diners' Club card. Keys for the locker.

Sanjoy: Locker? May be the clues to our crime are in that locker.

Sheila: What crime?

Sanjoy: Deepankar perhaps thinks that you have been unfaithful to him.

Sheila: Rubbish.

Sanjoy: I am only telling you about his thinking.

Sheila: What is your crime?

Sanjoy: I am his boss.

Sheila: Nonsense, Deepankar said something about a conspiracy. Mr. Knowall Sanjoy, what conspiracy!

Sanjoy: That is beyond my imagination. *(After a while)* Eureka. I've got it.

Sheila: So you now know what we were conspiring about?

Sanjoy: Oh no. Not the conspiracy; the proof. When Deepankar spoke of proof against us, he was not looking at the briefcase. He was looking at that packet. *(He picks up the packet)* Let's open it.

Saroj: Why not wait for Deepankar to come back.

Sheila: No, we must open it now. How can we prepare our defense unless we know the prosecution case?

Sanjoy: *(To* Sheila) With your permission *(He opens the packet)* There are only papers inside.

Sheila: Not papers. Documents. Deeds. Exhibits. Evidence against us.

Sanjoy: This is a letter on blue paper.

Saroj: I think we should not go through Deepankar's personal papers.

Sheila: That is my responsibility. Who has written the letter?

Sanjoy: No names. Neither at the top, nor at the bottom.

No clue as to who has written and to whom. But when it is written on blue paper...

Sheila: Love letter. Read out what is written.

Sanjoy: I never thought I would be writing these lines to you.

Sheila: Do continue.

Sanjoy: *(Puts the letter back in the envelope)* I have no patience with cheap love letters. Now, look at this notebook. Exhibit number two.

(He turns over the pages) All blank. Not a line written. *(He passes on the note book to* Sheila)

Sheila: *(Turns over the pages)* Suddenly, at such a disjointed moment, I felt that I had become impotent.

Sanjoy: What do you mean?

Sheila: It's all in this book. First chapter. Suddenly, at such a disjointed moment, I felt that I had become impotent.

Saroj: And then?

Sheila: *(Hands over the notebook to* Sanjoy) Nothing. The rest is blank.

Sanjoy: It all sounds mysterious. I hope it is not Deepankar's diary. But why the first chapter? What do you think of it, Sheila?

Sheila: Maybe.

Sanjoy: What may be?

Sheila: May be not.

Sanjoy: *(Picks up another paper)* Exhibit number three.

Appointment letter of our Company. And the letter below, strangely, a resignation letter. But there is no signature on it.

Sheila: Thank God. What else is there?

Sanjoy: Two books, 'Life after Death' and 'Hindu Divorce Law'. Invitation card of Deepankar's wedding. Another book—'World Theatre'. And a sealed bottle.

Sheila: What is there in the bottle?

Sanjoy: No labels. Could be poison.

Sheila: Could be ashes given by some Swamiji.

Saroj: Could be aspirin.

Sanjoy: A lottery ticket *(He puts everything back)* The prosecution rests now.

Sheila: The prosecution has failed to establish our guilt.

Sanjoy: We, the accused, can then leave now?

Saroj: Deepankar should be coming now. Why don't you ring him up?

Sanjoy: Where could he be?

Saroj: Why don't you try the club?

Sanjoy: I should have thought of that earlier. *(He picks up the phone, then puts it back on the cradle)* The telephone is dead. Someone seems to have pulled out the cords.

Sheila: One can hang oneself with a telephone cord.

Sanjoy: I am not going to wait any longer.

There is a bell. Sanjoy *lifts the telephone*

Saroj: The telephone is dead. That was the door bell.

Sheila *opens the door.* Deepankar *enters with a bottle in his hand. He is tipsy*

Deepankar: I'm sorry, I got late. I thought I will drop in the club for a while. But I stayed on longer. Wonderful party going on in the club. *(They thought he had forgotten about the birthday)* But—then I had to come back. Today is my birthday.

Sanjoy, Sheila, Saroj: Happy birthday!

Deepankar: Thank you. Thank you.

Sanjoy: Let's have a drink.

Deepankar: A toast first.

Sheila: Who for?

Deepankar: *(Takes a sip from the bottle)* For the girls I could not love, *(Takes another sip)* for the promises I could not keep, *(Another sip)* and for the dreams I could not have.

Sanjoy: None for your birthday?

Deepankar: Oh, yes. Today is my birthday. I wanted to do something today. What was it that I wanted? Didn't I tell you something when I left? *(He is worried that he cannot remember it. He sits down with his head in his hand)*

Saroj: You were telling us that you will try us.

Sanjoy: We are all innocent. We plead not guilty.

Sheila: There is no evidence against us.

Deepankar: That will be decided at the trial.

Sheila: Let's get on with the birthday first. Look, what I have brought you for a present. *(She gives a necktie to* Deepankar*)*

Sanjoy: *(Hands over a piece of paper)* Surprise for you. An advance increment.

Deepankar: How about you, Saroj?

(Saroj *removes a rose from her hair, and puts it on* Deepankar's *coat)* Necktie, advance increment, a rose. What a lack of imagination. Do you think Sanjoy, you can lure me away from my goal with this increment paper? You can frustrate all my plans?

Sanjoy: You don't know how much I had to work with the Head Office for this.

Deepankar: This may be very valuable for you; but for me today, it is only a scrap of paper. I think this piece of paper is a part of your conspiracy against me; I can tear it up into bits *(But he does not tear it)* You can take it back. (Shiela *takes the paper and keeps it in her bag)*

Sanjoy: I think I should be leaving now.

Sheila: *(To* Deepankar) What do you mean by insulting everyone?

You must apologise to Sanjoy.

Deepankar: I am the judge. You are all defendants.

Sheila: We have had enough of this. Do stop this nonsense.

Sanjoy: We meet tomorrow morning at eight, Deepankar.

Deepankar: Why do you want to leave now? The club is closed. The last train is also gone.

Sanjoy: Thanks for the evening. I must leave now.

Deepankar: No one leaves. Today, I decide what will happen. You are forgetting that you are all creatures of my imagination. You do not exist outside my dreams. I'll snap my fingers, and you will all vanish.

Sanjoy: Wonderful dialogue. But then I have no patience left to stay on.

Deepankar: Sanjoy, you are the first accused to be tried. (Sanjoy *wants to go, but* Deepankar *pulls out the revolver)* Get back to your seats. No one leaves the court room until the trial is over.

Sheila: Put back the revolver. It's loaded.

Sanjoy: Don't be childish. There may be an accident.

Deepankar: There will be no accidents today. Everything will happen the way I want them.

Saroj: Put back the revolver.

Deepankar: Who are you to tell me? I am the director of the show today. Take back your necktie, Sheila (Shiela *comes towards him)*. Not so close; don't you see the revolver in my hand. (Shiela *takes bock the necktie)* Saroj, take back your rose now.

Saroj: You can throw it away if you wish.

Deepankar: *(Throws the flower)* Order. The Court is now in session. Accused number one, Shri Sanjoy. *(He points the revolver and* Sanjoy *moves into an imaginary dock)*

Sanjoy: All right. Let me see it through.

Sheila: This is almost like a party game.

Deepankar: Contempt. Sheila, I warn you. *(He points the revolver at* Sanjoy)

Sanjoy: *(Before* Deepankar *says anything)* I, Sanjoy, do swear in the name of God that I'll speak the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. But please may I know what is my crime? Is it because I am your friend, or is it because I am your boss?

Deepankar: *(Does not reply to him. He hands over a piece if paper to* Sanjoy) What is this paper?

Sanjoy: You cannot force one to bear witness against himself. It is against law.

Deepankar: This is my law.

Sanjoy: This trial is a fraud. The so-called court is just a sitting room. The man calling himself the judge is my subordinate.

Deepankar: Contempt again *(He gestures with his revolver this time)* Do you see this paper?

Sanjoy: This is your appointment letter.

Deepankar: Does your name find mention on this paper?

Sanjoy: No. There was no need for it.

Deepankar: There was. When I joined, I should have been told about the man I was staking my future to. Look at this other paper. What does it say?

Sanjoy: A resignation letter.

Deepankar: Whose?

Sanjoy: It is not signed.

Deepankar: Could it be yours?

Sanjoy: Never.

Deepankar: Why not?

Sanjoy: I am quite happy with my job. I have never thought of resignation.

Deepankar: You have perhaps never lacked contentment in life .

But it is also a crime to be content. Do you know why there is no signature on this paper. The signing hand has been stopped every time with the lure of an increment. *(He shows the notebook to* Sanjoy) Do you know why this book has remained blank?

Sanjoy: Not exactly blank. There is a written line in that.

Deepankar: What is written?

Sanjoy: Suddenly, at such a disjointed moment, I felt that I had become impotent.

Deepankar: Why did you have such a feeling?

Sanjoy: Not me. It is the writer of this line.

Deepankar: Have you ever had such a feeling?

Sanjoy: *(With a slight hesitation)* No.

Deepankar: What oath did you take before giving evidence?

Sanjoy: I swear in the name of God that I will speak the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

Deepankar: Do you believe in God?

Sanjoy: Yes.

Deepankar: In ghosts?

Sanjoy: No.

Deepankar: Do you believe in destiny?

Sanjoy: *(After some hesitation)* Yes.

Deepankar: Had you seen a notebook like this one before?

Sanjoy: Yes, in the office.

Deepankar: What was written in it?

Sanjoy: It was the register for sales figures.

Deepankar: Have you seen a marriage register?

Sanjoy: You know I am unmarried.

Deepankar: You know Sheila?

Sanjoy: What do you want to say?

Deepankar: Do you know Sheila?

Sanjoy: Yes.

Deepankar: How well?

Sanjoy: *(He gestures rather dramatically)* She is my friend's wife. I have given her all the respect due to a friend's wife.

Deepankar: *(Shows him a book)* You see this book?

Sanjoy: We all saw it a short while ago.

Deepankar: What is the chapter heading where your finger is?

Sanjoy: The Art of Acting.

Deepankar: Did you ever need to read this chapter?

Sanjoy: No.

Deepankar: Have you ever purchased lottery tickets?

Sanjoy: Yes.

Deepankar: Is it because they do not pay you well.

Sanjoy: Oh, no.

Deepankar: Have you any views on the Divorce Law?

Sanjoy: No.

Deepankar: Have you ever tried to write poetry?

Sanjoy: No.

Deepankar: Have you ever tried to be moonlight?

Sanjoy: No.

Deepankar: What is the colour of the sky?

Sanjoy: Blue.

Deepankar: Always?

Sanjoy: Yes.

Deepankar: When you came back from the club, who opened the door for you?

Sanjoy: I do not remember.

Deepankar: *(Unexpectedly)* What is your relationship with Sheila?

Sanjoy: I have already told you.

Deepankar: What is it in your hand?

Sanjoy: *(Opens his hand to show a key)* A key.

Deepankar: Could it be a duplicate key for my house?

Sheila *is getting annoyed, and with this question comes forward.*

Sheila: The question is irrelevant and malicious.

Deepankar: Thank you. Accused number two, Mrs. Sheila.

Sheila: I think my crime is that I am married to you.

Deepankar: Oath first.

Sheila: *(Takes the book from* Deepankar) I swear by the Gita that I will speak the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

Deepankar: Thank you. Now read the title of the book.

Sheila: Divorce Law. Abridged edition.

Deepankar: Your name please.

Sheila: Sheila—Sheila Deepankar.

Deepankar: Which is the correct one? Sheila or Sheila Deepankar?

Sheila: Both.

Deepankar: *(Shows her the letter)* what is it?

Sheila: A love letter.

Deepankar: Have you ever written such letters.

Sheila: No.

Deepankar: *(Shows another paper)* And this paper?

Sheila: It is the invitation letter of our wedding.

Deepankar: Did Sanjoy attend our wedding?

Sheila: I don't know.

Deepankar: You know what is written in the notebook.

Sheila: Yes.

Deepankar: When did such a feeling come?

Sheila: At such a disjointed moment.

Deepankar: Was it literal or metaphorical?

Sheila: May be both.

Deepankar: Could one snare a man with a necktie?

Sheila: I do not know.

Deepankar: Could one measure life with the burning candles on a birthday cake?

Sheila: I do not know.

Deepankar: Which is bigger? One or two?

Sheila: Two, of course.

Deepankar: Will you be happy if I write poems?

Sheila: Maybe.

Deepankar: How well do you know Sanjoy?

Sheila: He is your friend.

Deepankar: Have you ever acted?

Sheila: No.

Deepankar: Do you think there is life after death?

Sheila: I don't know.

Deepankar: Do you know what my blood pressure is?

Sheila: I do not remember.

Deepankar: Who has the keys of this house?

Sheila: I have.

Deepankar: May I see them? (Shiela *takes them out of her bag and shows them)* Thank you. Do you have aspirin tablets in your bag?

Sheila: No.

Deepankar: Do you have a rose in your hair?

Sheila: No.

Deepankar: Do you know what our bank balance is?

Sheila: Yes.

Deepankar: Close your eyes. (Shiela *closes her eyes)* Do you see any dreams?

Sheila: I see only darkness.

Deepankar: Have you ever lost your keys?

Sheila: No.

Deepankar: Or gone astray?

Sheila: No.

Deepankar: Have you ever wanted me?

Sheila: Yes.

Deepankar: Have you ever got me?

Sheila: Sometimes.

Deepankar: Do you plead guilty.

Sheila: I am innocent. I have not done anybody any harm.

Deepankar: Thank you. Now accused number three, Saroj. Take your oath by God that you will speak the truth.

Saroj: I do not believe in God.

Deepankar: Who do you believe in? Destiny? Then swear in the name of Destiny.

Saroj: There is no need for any oath. I will speak only the truth.

Deepankar: And nothing but the truth.

Saroj: You very well know that I have never spoken anything but the truth.

Deepankar: Your name is Rose or Saroj,

Saroj: Saroj.

Deepankar: This pull-over you are knitting, what is the design?

Saroj: Two purl and four knit.

Deepankar: What is your favourite flower?

Saroj: Rose.

Deepankar: Can the flowers of the park wear saries?

Saroj: Well, they can.

Deepankar: Can you switch over from sari to frock?

Saroj: Maybe I can.

Deepankar: You love your husband?

Saroj: Yes.

Deepankar: Did not you say that you will speak nothing but the truth?

Saroj: Yes.

Deepankar: What is the definition of love?

Saroj: Not everything needs to be comprehended through definition.

Deepankar: How many days has July?

Saroj: Thirty-one

Deepankar: *(Shows the letter)* Who wrote it?

Saroj: An immature girl.

Deepankar: Could life be a waiting from one letter to another?

Saroj: Sometimes. For some people.

Deepankar: Could life be a procession?

Saroj: It could be. Sometimes. For some people.

Deepankar: Wedding or funeral?

Saroj: Sometimes wedding. Sometimes funeral.

Deepankar: Have you got all that you wanted out of life?

Saroj: Yes.

Deepankar: Have you got your keys in your bag?

Saroj: Yes.

Deepankar: Could those keys open the doors of this house?

Saroj: I never tried.

Deepankar: Do you remember the past?

Saroj: Yes.

Deepankar: Did you try to forget?

Saroj: It is not necessary to forget.

Deepankar: Where is a flower more beautiful? In the park or in someone's button-hole.

Saroj: A flower is beautiful anywhere.

Deepankar: Is flower a definition of love?

Saroj: Not everything needs to be comprehended through definition.

Deepankar: Is not remembering a crime?

Saroj: No.

Deepankar: If I say, to love is a crime.

Saroj: You will be wrong.

Deepankar: *(He was now tired and seemed to be losing interest)* Thank you. It is now proved beyond doubt from your testimony that you are all guilty. You are all responsible for my present condition. I am now going to sentence you.

Sanjoy: Don't play with that revolver, for heaven's sake.

Sheila: The game is now over.

Deepankar: Game? You never took me seriously Sheila. I will punish you first. *(He lifts the revolver.* Shiela *screams)*

Saroj: Put it back.

Deepankar: Who are you to tell me?

Saroj *comes forward and takes away the revolver from* Deepankar. *From*

that moment, Deepankar *suddenly looks weary and exhausted and on the verge if collapse*

Thank you. It is rather late. You may all go now.

Sanjoy: We are not leaving. The game has just begun.

Deepankar: I am tired.

Sanjoy: But the show must go on. The court has not adjourned. We are going to try you now. Take your oath.

Deepankar: I swear in the name of God that I will speak the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth? I plead guilty. You may punish me.

Sanjoy: But we cannot punish you without a trial. We will have a trial first.

Deepankar: Please have pity on me. I cannot answer any of your questions now.

Deepankar *starts taking off his clothes to go to bed. He moves from bench to desk to couch, throwing his coat, tie, shoes about.* Shiela *and* Sanjoy *keep on badgering him with their questions, as he moves*

Sanjoy: Your name please.

Sheila: Is it Swami Deepankar?

Sanjoy: Give a few quotations from Shakespeare.

Sheila: If a letter is not addressed to anyone, does it mean that it is intended for you?

Sanjoy: You remember the sales figures?

Sheila: What is the definition of love?

Sanjoy: What is the definition of the telephone?

Sheila: Of God?

Sanjoy: Do you know how poems transform themselves into a revolver?

Sheila: Can you cut a cake with a revolver?

Sanjoy: Are all impotent people cowards?

Sheila: Are all cowards impotent?

Sanjoy: Which is a crime, being number one or being number two?

Sheila: Can the saris wear flowers of the park?

Sanjoy: Can the parks wear saris of flowers?

Sheila: Is life a lottery?

Sanjoy: Can you keep love in a locker?

Sheila: Can you open someone's heart with a key?

Deepankar: Please forgive me. I do not know anything.

Sanjoy: Thank you. We have finished our examination. *(To* Saroj) Your witness. (Saroj *stands before* Deepankar *and looks into his eyes.* Deepankar *lowers his eyes)*

Deepankar: I am tired.

Saroj: I have only one question for you.

Deepankar: I'll not be able to answer any question now.

Saroj: Just one question.

Deepankar: Have pity on me.

Saroj: My question is: Have you ever been in love? Except with yourself?

Deepankar *looks helpless at* Saroj, *and lies down on the couch*

Deepankar: It is very late in the night. *(He closes his eyes)* All is darkness now. *(He falls asleep. All the lights go on, and the mysterious atmosphere vanishes)*

Sanjoy: Many thanks, Sheila. Nice evening.

Sheila: Evening? It is late night now.

Sanjoy: A very unusual birthday.

Sheila: Deepankar is asleep.

Sanjoy: He has a fertile imagination.

Saroj *picks up* Deepankar's *coat, tie, etc. and arranges the room.*

Sanjoy: I must leave now.

Sheila: Let me see you to the door.

Sanjoy *and* Shiela *walk to the door.* Saroj *pulls a wrapper over* Deepankar, *goes back to the park bench, and sits down, tired.*

She remembers the revolver in the bag, takes it out and puts it in the drawer. She goes back to the bench.

Now she sees the rose on the floor. She picks it up, and pins it on Deepankar's *coat.*

She goes back to the bench and waits for Shiela, *as the stage goes dark.*

Curtain

Translated by the Author

Director's Note

Ram Gopal Bajaj

My foreword will have no value if I do not tell the story behind the selection of this play or how the play got its name. 'I am giving you the copy of a play. Read it and give me your opinion', and a file came in my hand. 'I want it before evening.' It was the Hindi translation of a play by the Oriya poet Jagannath Prasad Das, but the name of the translator was missing. Anyway, I left the office of Akashvani with the copy of the play handed over to me by Dina bhai, who was in charge of the Drama Section. The activities of our group Dishantar were quite prolific and I was about to join Punjab University as a Reader in the Department of Indian Drama and Theatre. The monsoons of 1973 was coming to an end. I started reading the play and stopped only after finishing it. I could feel the protagonist Deepankar enter into my self. Towards the end, I felt the environment engulfed in deep silence. The sad symphony of a conscious world began to sway and I went to Dina bhai, and told him, 'Brother, I want to direct this play.' I had just directed Badal Sircar's play *Sesh Nei* (translated in Hindi as *Ant Nahi*) for Dishantar. This play too had the protagonist wandering in the realm of subconsciousness, but I could not connect with Jagannnath Prasad Das and I left for Punjab. It was only after passage of some time and during the staging of *Surya ki Antim Kiran Se Surya ki Pahli Kiran Tak* at Rabindra Bhavan, one tall youngman of dusky complexion came up to me and said, 'I want to meet the Director of this play, Ram Gopal Bajaj.' I met him. This person was Jagannath Prasad Das himself. I think the word had reached him that I wanted to

direct his play, but somehow contact could not be established earlier. Anyway...

Days passed but I could not give a name to the play—after a great deal of thought, the name 'Suryast' came, but its interchange to 'Suryastak' sounded more appropriate. Finally, with the playwright's consent we decided to call it 'Suryastak'.

Now comes the question of the soul of the drama. Why is Deepankar so troubled after all? He has everything much above the needs for an average living. The answer lies in the play—he is distraught with his relationship with his past lover—'tolerant friend', his boss and friend and his wife. He always weighs his relationships from his point of view and his context. Deepankar never had a clear answer whenever the question of what he desired from his life came up. As a result, he became more irritated. His reactions, dialogues are all very dramatic. Why so? Is he hypocritical? If he is bored and even if he wants to get away from his superficial life, then whose side should he take? But answers elude him. Questions were raised more virulently by Om Puri, who was playing the role of Deepankar, on this issue during the rehearsals. Earlier, playwright Kamal Kapoor and the dramatist himself had pointed out to Deepankar's tragedy of helpless condition and resultant loss afflicting many people around us. Therefore, the dramatic effect of such a situation could not be overlooked, but its intensity had led to a situation of an individual who madly outlines a rebellion, but does nothing in the end and is not someone with whom one could identify. He talks of high ideals, feels them too, but in the absence of any dramatic outcome, all this crumbles. I feel that there is a huge loss of compassion and consciousness in a vast section of lower middle class once they achieve some status in society. The discovery of the conflict with one's personality within onself, the obstructions and mocking anger in themselves are apt dramatic conditions for him.

Possibily coming to terms with this reality and its inherent tragedy in themselves create situations of epic proportions and is comic in itself. Our entire effort in staging this play has been to ridicule, but not make it into a humorous play. This derision comes

from the situations of relations between these four individuals closely linked to each other. These four characters—the husband, the wife, the lover-friend and the boss—create the environment or rather the outcome of their situations. However, no attempt has been made to directly create this environment which has resulted in these situations. Om Puri through his acting creates Deepankar's bitterness towards his situation and elicits a reaction from the established system. I think a person is more real in life during times of distress mainly due to his self-centeredness, more so since this condition arises because he is oblivious of everything else. He is unable to connect with a larger self and his realisation of his situation puts a question-mark on all his other achievements. Simultanesously, he is unable to free himself from the mundane achievements since possibly he is nothing without them. Deepankar is one person who wishes to rebel everyday, but is never able to show the resolve to do so. Will he ever make an entry into that list of individuals who at any given age are willing to take the plunge to do what they believe in? We do not show him as a person who can do so for the simple reason that we want the audiences to not get dejected, or treat this an aberration, but to feel bitter about this and to be able to nudge them in the direction of a reaction.

The presentation and stage-setting for the play are very simple and easily done, thanks mainly to the fact that there are just four characters. But it is equally difficult since there is no scope for styling the stage or the benefit of a large cast which can create an impact. From the perspective of stagecraft, we are just giving credence to the way Deepankar runs his proceedings against his accused, just as a way. Sanjoy and Sheila are not just the same as Deepankar sees them. Even though mostly they are like this, but they have their own sufferings. Their own dreams. The play will change its course if Sanjoy's side becomes our focus. Sheila's inner suffering does peep out when she mentions about Babloo's letter, or when she tries to adjust with Deepankar. From the perspective of Saroj and Sheila, Deepankar is just a weak, self-centered person with whom they are associated. It is difficult for them to have our complete sympathy. More so since in the

dramatic construction, every character is being viewed from Deepankar's side who himself is completely absorbed with himself. To the audiences, these weak, though sensitive people, are seen in an agitated state. These situations lead you to the point of ridicule without being negative in its connotation. Therefore, in order to give more depth to the characters, prominence has been given to a slow pace and focus on these differences which result in poetic silences. We have attempted to create an environment of subconsciousness and a dream-like situation through the use of lighting on the stage. We have also used symphony as the background music as a small, inaudible sound magnifies into a loud note just as the state of subconsciousness. I believe that such music will complement unstated and invisible elements of the enactment and will be helpful both for the play and the performers.

The Underdog

Translated by
Ravi Baswani

When in doubt, recall the face of the poorest and the most helpless man whom you may have seen and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he be able to gain anything by it? Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to Swaraj, or self rule for the hungry millions of our countrymen? Then you will find your doubts and yourself melting away.

M.K. Gandhi

Picture overleaf

Asim Basu and Muduli
in *Saba Shesha Loka* (Odia)
Bhubaneswar, 1979



The Underdog

Introduction

J.N. Kaushal

I do not mean to imply that the world is turned upside down when we look at a particular situation through the eyes of a poet, but it does achieve a different dimension which is not visible to us ordinary mortals.

J.P. Das is a poet turned playwright, and his poetic sensitivity, compassion and perspective inform his plays. The poet in him seems to help him perceive life at the elitist or its lowest level with the same understanding of the human nature. In his new play *Sabse Neeche Ka Aadmi* (The Underdog) staged recently in Delhi, J.P. probes into the minds of a cross section of the society who shout themselves hoarse saying 'Garibi Hatao'. It is the story of the underdog, the common man who dreams about his place in society and of the day he will become a respectable member of the circle where he is slaving himself for a living. Many people come forward and offer him lip sympathy, but does it serve his purpose?

Sabse Neeche Ka Admi has Babuji, who represents the establishment; Professor who is intellectual; Kumar who is on his way to reach the top of the social ladder; and Meena, the exploited section of the fair sex. Professor has nothing original to say. He quotes Shakespeare and repeats plagiarized versions of other writers in his own plays. He is, in fact, an author who is always ready to write things as made to order. His original contribution is nil and his intellect borrowed. Das's youth Kumar belongs to the upper middle class. He is eager to etch out a career for himself by hook or by crook. His interest in theatre or his concern for Meena are just means to this end. He is fickle-minded, easily flattered and easily satisfied. Meena, on the

other hand, has compromised or rather naturalized herself with the situation. She has no personal feelings. She is least affected by the happenings around her. She has closed herself into the shell of comfort, luxury and security provided by Babuji. Babuji is a typical businessman who knows his cards and always plays it cool. He has purchased Meena's body, Professor's intellect, and Kumar's ambitions. They all lick his feet and he knows what they are and how to use them. He runs a drama club and all the others dance to his tune. One day he decides to do something about the lowest of the low in society. They all start looking for such a person and they are surprised to find that Ramu, their servant is the right person. They hardly know anything about him, his family background, his ambitions, his dreams, his character-traits. That would make a wonderful play.

The need to know more about the common man takes them out to the streets where a procession is going on as a result of a general strike. They feel uneasy coming out of their secure den and rubbing shoulders with the common people. Ramu suddenly becomes a hero for the group. Professor decides to write a play on him sponsored by Babuji. Meena wants to know more about Ramu's brother Shyam who sounds like the deliverer of the common masses. Kumar feels jealous of Shyam, the non-existent person who resembles Ramu. Fascinated by Ramu, and after having a short glimpse of the suffering majority, Professor and Kumar revolt against Babuji. Babuji knows that their protest is nothing but a display of impotent anger and that they would return to him. And they do return to him. When Shyam comes on the scene, nobody cares for him. *Sabse Neeche Ka Aadmi* will just have to wait for something to happen, which will explode and change the society.

Das's poetic justice makes his characters larger than life. They do not remain individuals, but become symbols of various sections of the society. Das sketches his characters in a tongue-in-cheek manner, and his satire is not hard hitting but rather soft and mellow. Das does not make definitive statements. He leaves many things to the imagination of the audience or gives only suggestions, as a poet would. But he does succeed in saying many things with a minimum of words.

The Underdog
Cast: Kumar, Meena, Professor, Babuji, Ram/Shyam

Act One

(Kumar and Meena in Meena's drawing room. Kumar wants to say something to the indifferent Meena, who is sitting with her eyes closed. After a while, Kumar gathers courage and goes to sit next to her. Before he can say something, Babuji calls out to Meena from inside. Meena exits. Frustrated, Kumar goes back to his original seat and starts munching peanuts.

After a while, Meena returns to her seat. Kumar again tries to speak, but is interrupted this time by the entry of the Professor. Kumar returns to his seat.

The Professor is out of breath, having climbed up the stairs. He is carrying a walking stick and a notebook in his left hand, and a pen in his right hand. He is about to sit down when Babuji, clad in pajama-kurta, enters. They all get up. As soon as they resume their seats the Professor opens his notebook.)

Professor: On the way here, I came across two people who were ahead of me. They were busy talking. They had probably lost their way. One of them remarked: "When we have got into the street, surely we will find a way out of it." Hearing this, a phrase flashed in my mind: "Life is a stage with one entrance, but many exits." I wondered if it was a quotation from Shakespeare, and if so ...

Babuji: We have to forget Shakespeare.

Professor: *(writing in his notebook)* That's a good slogan.

Kumar: Like God is dead.

Professor: *(notes this too, but as soon as he realises its implication...)* I don't think I believe in this. But I might use this phrase in one of my plays, in the villain's mouth.

Babuji: Writers are tape-recorders, *(Professor notes this down.*

Babuji goes over and closes his notebook) I was referring to you, Professor. Your cliche-ridden writings wouldn't work now.

Professor: I have completed a new play. I had to spend twelve nights on it.

Kumar: *Twelfth Night?*

Babuji: Who have you translated this time?

Professor: Shakespeare. Who else? *Measure for Measure.*

Babuji: Shakespeare is dead.

Kumar: Like God is dead. *(Professor makes to note this, but realises that he has already got this statement down.)*

Professor: No. Shakespeare cannot die. There is a Shakespeare revival everywhere these days. Why, in England itself, since 1946, on an average, fifty plays of Shakespeare are staged every year. I firmly believe that if Shakespeare had been alive today, he would have been one of the most famous personalities of the world.

Babuji: And why not? He would have been four hundred years old. Remember the last time when we staged Shakespeare? How many people were there in the audience?

Professor: We don't have a discriminating audience in the city.

Meena: We once performed for an audience of only eight. Actors outnumbered the audience.

Kumar: But I must say the audience here is intelligent and alert. I remember when the first rotten egg hit me. It was exactly during the climatic scene. In spite of this, how can we honestly say that they have no respect for Shakespeare?

Professor: Long live Shakespeare. No, no, I wasn't talking about his being 400 years of age. I was referring to his works. Kumar, give me a cigarette.

(Kumar gives the packet to Professor.)

Babuji: No. Shakespeare wouldn't do now ...

Professor: If you want, I can make all the characters Indian. Remember my *Bangal ka Baniya?* An adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice.*

Kumar: Yes, I remember your *Madhurena Samapayet* and *Bahvaarmbhe Laghukriya* for *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Much Ado About Nothing.*

Professor: I can transform all the characters into Hindustani. Even *Henry VI.* You must have read my article—"Was Shakespeare Indian?" I have tried to establish that there was the influence of Indian philosophy on his works.

Babuji: You might as well prove that he was an Indian, and his real name was Sheshappa Ayyar.

Professor: But I am sure Shakespeare had read the Gita. Remember when Lady Blanche says in *King John:* "Which is the side that I must go withal? Whoever win, on that side shall I lose." This is exactly like Arjuna's predicament in the Mahabharata. Or like Hamlet's—"To be or not to be?"

Kumar: How did you translate that?

Professor: Rahen ke na rahen.

Babuji: Such a powerful soliloquy sounds like Bol Radha Bol. With dialogues like these, rotten eggs are no surprise. No, you will have to write a new play now.

Professor: Other than Shakespeare? I had thought of serving Shakespeare all my life—I mean by way of study and translation. In fact, one lifetime is too short a span to do all this. There is a lot to do on even small aspects of Shakespeare's works. Recently, I have taken up a new topic: Did Duncan sleep in the nude? This discovery will unearth many secrets of *Macbeth.* Like why didn't Lady Macbeth kill Duncan immediately on entering his chamber; or why did she faint afterwards? Why ...

Babuji: You will have to write a completely different play.

Professor: You know, I have written other types of plays too. People said it was necessary to write absurd plays to become a modern playwright. So I wrote ...

Kumar: *Ramblings of the Yeti.*

Professor: No. It was the *Soliloquy of the Snowman.*

Kumar: And such tongue-twisting dialogues. It's easier to say she sells sea shells.

Meena: Those were the Yeti's dialogues. As for you, you can't even speak simple straightforward lines properly. Remember, when you had to say to me "I have no faith in your entity" (astitva) you said "I have no faith in your chastity" (satitva).

Professor: Dialogue delivery is an art. In my class, you ...

Kumar: I have told you time and again that I was a Science student. I had nothing to do with your classes. It's only out of sheer respect that I call you sir.

(Professor takes another cigarette from Kumar's packet. He has been chain smoking. Kumar can't ask for a cigarette in Babuji's presence and is annoyed that the Professor is smoking away his cigarettes.)

Babuji: Well, if you can't write a new play, we shall have to ask someone else.

Professor: Someone else's play while I am here? I am a founder member of this organisation.

Babuji: This organisation belongs only to me. The lead actor is my employee. I pay for the room where you have rehearsals ...

Meena: But this is my house. That I belong to Babuji is another matter.

Kumar: Sir, why argue? Write a play as Babuji commands.

Professor: But Shakespeare ... my principles ...

Babuji: What principles? You are a hired writer. Your job is to entertain the people.

Professor: Then I shall have to write according to their taste.

Babuji: There is no such thing as the people's taste. I decide their taste. There is no such thing as a public opinion. What I write becomes public opinion. The headlines of my newspaper today become the people's slogans tomorrow. I point my finger, and the masses follow like a flock of sheep in that direction.

Professor: But Shakespeare ...

Babuji: If I want, I can banish Shakespeare from this town. Understand?

Professor: Yes, I understand. On what subject do I have to write this new play?

Kumar: Sir, write something on the problems of students. These days everyone is concerned about this issue. Just give me the student leader's role and ...

Babuji: I doubt if you can convincingly portray even your own self. If you could act a wee bit of what you do in real life, we wouldn't be getting such scathing reviews. Professor, we need a really meaty play this time.

Professor: *(taking out his notebook)* On what subject?

Babuji: On the current situation.

Professor: *(writing)* On the current situation *(absent-mindedly)* tea...

Babuji: Let us discuss the subject now. Kumar, tea ...

Kumar: *(absent-mindedly)* Ramu, tea.

(All become conscious of Ram's absence.)

Babuji: It seems Ramu hasn't come yet.

Kumar: *(dramatically)* Ramu. Tea. *(Ram enters with the tea. All heave a sigh of relief. After serving tea, Ram sits near Babuji and begins polishing his shoes. Accidentally, he spills Kumar's tea. Kumar slaps him, then forgets him.)*

Babuji: These days, everyone is talking of social commitments. Therefore, we'll have to take up some burning problems of the day.

Professor: Burning problems? You mean burning of the seventy year old Harijan by some caste Hindus? Or the burning of the buses by the college students? Or bride burning?

Kumar: Or that old woman who died after a twelve-hour wait in the queue?

Meena: What about those lovers who had to end their lives because they belonged to different communities?

Professor: How can I write about them? What I know is only from newspaper reports. I have no personal knowledge about them.

Meena: I know about that woman in the queue. She was a black marketeer, or else what does an old woman need vegetable oil for? I am sure she wanted to buy it so as to sell it again on premium. This is the main cause of shortage of essential commodities.

Professor: It's quite possible she died of hunger, and this talk of dying in the queue is just to malign the government.

Meena: That old Harijan might have been burnt by the overturning of a lantern. The lovers might have taken some poisonous drug by mistake. The bus might have been burnt due to a short circuit.

Babuji: We shall have to write a play about such people. On small problems of small people. About the underdogs of the society. Their uplift is our sacred duty. We have to elevate their social status. We must fulfil this duty of ours through our play. No more plays of your kings, merchants and gentlemen, please. Let's now talk about the common man. Tom, Dick and Harry. Ram, Shyam and ... well, this Ramu for instance. *(All eyes turn to the brooding Ram.)* Yes, write a play on Ramu.

Professor: I need seven days.

Babuji: Know anything about him? Who is he? Where has he come from? How many brothers and sisters he has? Where he stays?

Professor: To tell you the truth, I know nothing about him.

Meena: No one knows anything about him. I don't even know if he is married. Ramu, are you married?

Kumar: We keep a servant and we know nothing about him.

Professor: *(looks at Ramu)* Yond Cassius has a lean and hungry look; he thinks too much; such men are dangerous.

Babuji: We didn't even know his name when he came about five years ago. We used to call him: eh, boy!

Professor: As far as I remember, it is we who had named him Ramu.

Meena: If I were to give a name, I would have called him Raj Kumar.

Professor: No, Ramu. If I am to write about such a man, he has to be called only Ramu nothing else.

Babuji: I am sure that's what must have been in our minds while naming him. O.K. Professor, now start writing. Don't forget that it is our bounden duty to uplift the lower classes, the underdog.

Kumar: What is there to write about these people? These

characters are colourless. How do you fit in a heroine? I wouldn't play the lead in such a play. It'll be disastrous for my image.

Babuji: You know, for quite some time, I have been thinking of having a new lead actor.

Kumar: A new lead actor? After all those rotten eggs, tomatoes and chappals—

Babuji: Ramu, go and ask the driver to bring the car. *(Ram exits)* Ramu could be given Ramu's role. *(goes in)*

Meena: Wonderful! Ramu won't even have to act. His entering the stage, as it is, will be sufficient.

Kumar: Nonsense. Acting needs talent.

Professor: Ramu is also eager to act. In fact, we'd have found it difficult to manage without Ramu. We need him from cleaning the rehearsal rooms to handling the main curtain.

Meena: It was he who was roughed up by the audience when we had to cancel the show due to heavy rains.

(Babuji calls her inside, she goes.)

Kumar: This has nothing to do with acting ability.

Professor: What you do on stage most of the time also has nothing to do with acting ability.

Kumar: Why not write about someone in the upper middle class? They too have their problems like the rising cost of petrol; the acute scarcity of imported cosmetics, and so on.

Professor: No, it has to be Ramu. Let me get some details from him, then see the kind of play I will give you.

(Babuji enters. He is in coat and tie now. Soon after, Ram enters. He informs him that the car is ready.)

Babuji: You wait here. I will be back in ten minutes after seeing a friend at the station.

Professor: Now, let's begin. *(takes out his notebook. Ram sits at his feet.)*

Kumar: While you write the play, please don't forget that I will be doing the lead role.

Meena: First of all, the name. The hero's name is Raj Kumar.

Professor: Ramu, what is your name?

Ram: Ram.

Meena: Ramchandra, Ramlal, Ram Kumar, Ram Prakash, Ram Mohan ...

Professor: No, no. Your real name. Ramu is a name we gave you. What did your parents name you?

Ram: My name is Ram.

Kumar: Full name Ramdas. When I do this role, people will be reminded of Devdas.

Meena: Or of Charandas, the *Chor.*

Professor: Think hard and tell me your actual name. Yadu, Madhu, Shyam ...

Ram: Shyam is my brother's name.

Kumar: Excellent. Thank you, Ramdas! *(affectionately slaps Ram)* Ram and Shyam. Twin brothers. Double role. Sir, I have no objection in doing this role.

Professor: What about your family members?

Ram: No one else. Just my brother.

Professor: Your home, where is it?

Ram: I don't remember. We came here years ago.

Professor: Who is 'we'.

Ram: Me, Shyam and all our village folk.

Professor: When did you come? Why?

Ram: That was the year of the famine. There had been no rains; all the ponds and streams had dried up. The crop was scorched; farming came to a stand still. Hunger all around. Not even a drop of water was available. We consumed all the wild fruits and roots in the forest. Even the tree leaves were not spared. We all had to leave the village. We sold off or pawned our belongings. Empty-handed, hungry, thirsty, we moved towards the city. After seven day's march, we arrived here. Four old men and two children died on the way. Everyone moved on; only we two were left behind.

Kumar: Which two?

Professor: Don't interrupt. Ram and Shyam, who else? Then what?

Ram: I was almost dying. I had high fever, I lay under a tree mumbling and unconscious. I was dying of hunger but there was nothing to eat. I felt as if I were in a dream. In one such dream Shyam came to me and told me that he was going to find something for me to eat.

Kumar: What happened to Shyam after that?

Professor: Shut up. *(Lights a cigarette, offers a cigarette to Kumar, but keeps the packet in his pocket)* I am writing this play. I need these details. We have had enough about Shyam. Ramu, do you remember your parents?

Ram: No. I only remember that we were farmers.

Professor: What's your caste?

Ram: I don't know.

Kumar: I hope he is not a Harijan. *(moves away from Ram)* He has been with us for such a long time, and we don't even know his caste.

Professor: Will you please keep quiet. What happened after that?

Ram: I recovered. I started begging for a living.

Then came the long awaited rains. I got a job. The villagers returned to the village. I stayed behind. But Shyam did not return.

Kumar: Perhaps he's still looking for some food for you.

Ram: I have food and shelter. Babuji's expensive car is my room partner. And as for food, I ate to my heart's content yesterday morning.

Meena: Yesterday morning? What do you mean?

Haven't you had food since?

Professor: For god's sake, stop all these stupid questions. Yes, go on ...

Ram: I did many odd jobs in the city. Shoe shine, coolie, waiter, peon, cinema usher...

Meena: What happened to Shyam?

Ram: I don't know. But he knows everything about me. Sometimes he sends me news. He also writes letters.

Professor: What news? What does he write?

Ram: Very strange things. Once he wrote: we are getting ready.

Professor: Who's we? What were they getting ready for?

Ram: That's all he wrote. In another letter he wrote: I am coming soon; wait for me. But he didn't come. After that, he sent this book *(takes out a book from his pocket and gives it to the Professor)* and wrote: in our struggle, this book shall be our weapon.

Kumar: What book?

Professor: *Gandhivani.* The message of Gandhi. *(Gives the book to Kumar.)*

Kumar: You receive his letters and yet you don't know his whereabouts?

Ram: I get bits and pieces of news about him. Sometimes people come and tell me about him. Once I heard that he had been jailed for theft. But I know he is no thief. Another time that he had burnt his hand while making crackers for Diwali. I keep getting such news of him. I don't know what to believe and what not to believe.

Kumar: *(discovers a photo in the book)* When did you have this photograph taken? *(Gives the snapshot to Meena.)*

Ram: This is Shyam's photograph. He sent it with his letter,

Kumar: What nonsense! This is your photograph. The eyes, the nose, the ears—they're all yours.

Meena: Look at his eyes. *(Kumar stares at Ram's eyes)* No. The eyes in photograph.

Kumar: What's so special about them? Sir, do have a look.

Professor: Meena is right. Just look at them. Know what they are saying? That we know everything. You can't fool us anymore. I have been dumb and mute all along, but no more. The time has come.

Meena: The eyes are saying: come and stand before me. Today is the day of your trial. You shall have to answer now.

Professor: The eyes are saying ...

Kumar: Oh, no. This is Ramu's photo. I can swear that it is Ramu, only Ramu and nobody but Ramu. If this is Shyam, then I bet that either Shyam and Ramu are the same person or else they're twins.

Meena: You seem to be seeing too many films.

Kumar: What's so special about the eyes? I think you are unnecessarily trying to be melodramatic.

Professor: In my class, I once explained a poem about the eyes which ...

Kumar: I was never your student.

Professor: Then let me do my work. I am talking to Ram; you keep quiet, or else leave the class room. You'll understand everything once the play's completed.

Kumar: Give me back my packet. *(Professor lights a cigarette and hands over the packet to Kumar. He and Ram go towards the rear and continue their discussion. Kumar and Meena sit down. Kumar tries to take a cigarette, but discovers that the packet is empty. Disgusted, he throws the packet away.)*

Kumar: The old hog has finished the whole packet. Always borrows money. When you ask him to return, starts quoting Shakespeare: "He who steals my purse steals trash". *(Meena pays no attention)* I am thinking of shifting to Bombay. There is no future for me here.

Meena: You have acted in eight plays.

Kumar: You must have seen the reviews. They said that I have not acted in eight plays but have done the same role in eight plays.

Meena: If the opinion of critics were taken seriously, I don't think any art form in the world would have prospered.

Kumar: But you know, I sometimes feel that they are absolutely right. I have no talents. I am only fit to be a clerk in Babuji's office, which I am.

Meena: What are you going to do with your future?

Kumar: You have known me for so many years. We have acted together. Do you think I am capable of getting anywhere?

Meena: That's up to you.

Kumar: Why are you so indifferent towards me? Don't you know that I think a lot about you and want to say something to you?

Meena: What is it?

Kumar: I want to tell you about myself. My thoughts, my actions, my problems. How I came to Babuji after a long fruitless search for a job. How I am being compelled to marry a girl I have not even seen. How ...

Meena: Yes, yes. What else?

Kumar: If you don't want to listen, I have nothing to tell you.

Meena: I hope you are not going to talk about love?

Kumar: You never let me say anything. I think of so many things. Spend sleepless nights. But when I see you I just dry up. May be, it's because you don't want to listen to me.

Meena: Do you know anything about me?

Kumar: You are an artiste and art is your life.

Meena: Do *you* know anything about my personal life?

Kumar: I do not want to know anything.

Meena: That's because you are afraid to face the truth of my life. You want to know me, but from a safe distance.

Kumar: That's not true. I can't exactly say what I want, but...

Meena: Do you know of my relationship with Babuji?

Kumar: I don't want to know.

Meena: I am his mistress. He owns the house I live in; he owns the car I drive. These saris that I wear. Babuji has paid for my body and soul. Oh yes, now tell me what you want to say.

Kumar: I don't want to say anything. I am leaving this city.

Meena: Foolish dreams. Do you think I could ever be free? All my life I have merely changed cages. Who shall release me? I am like the stone Ahilya, I am the accursed Kubja. My life is a wait. But where are the foot steps of Ramchandra? Where is the magic touch of Krishna?

Kumar: All this is stupid talk. If we decide, we could this very minute...

(Professor comes upstage. The mood changes. Kumar becomes silent.)

Professor: Interesting. Very interesting.

Kumar: This lunatic won't let us talk. *(irritated, to Professor)* What happened, sir?

Professor: The play will be written. About the other person.

Kumar: Now who is this other person?

Meena: Don't be silly. Shyam, who else?

Kumar: *(irritated)* Who is Shyam?

Meena: You have forgotten everything. Shyam is Ramu's brother, who else?

Professor: Shyam is not only Ramu's brother. He stands for all that which Ramu is not.

Kumar: Why is such a fuss being made about Shyam? Babuji asked you to write a play about Ramu.

Professor: Not possible. There is no drama in his life. He has no individuality. He is just a part of the crowd. He has no birth, life or death of his own. He has only a momentary existence. He is just one of a large slogan shouting procession. He is one of the masses who pull the chariot. They are not individual persons; they are a crowd. I shall have to write about Shyam.

Meena: What do you know about Shyam?

Professor: Ramu has told me enough. If required, I may have to meet Shyam.

Meena: Can we meet Shyam? How? When?

Kumar: There is no such person as Shyam. He is just a figment of Ramu's imagination. Have you forgotten that Ramu saw him in a delirium? Sick and deprived people do have such hallucinations.

Professor: Wrong. My interpretation is different, If you recollect, I had said...

Kumar: Sir ...

Professor: I know, you were not my student. One does not feel proud of boys like you being his students. Not in my class, but in one of my plays I had dealt with a similar situation. Lest the audience would not understand it, I had to edit it. But that is a different story.

Kumar: We are making a mountain of a mole-hill. There is no one called Shyam. This photograph is Ramu's. Ramu talks of Shyam, yet he doesn't know where he lives, what he does. I can prove that all this is a big lie. Ramu ... *(Kumar slaps Ram when he goes near him.)*

Meena: What is this?

Kumar: Ramu, tell us the truth about what you have told us.

Ram: I am leaving.

(Meena stops Kumar from slapping Ram again.)

Kumar: Where will you go? What will you do? If you do not come clean, I'll tell Babuji and he'll throw you out. What is this nonsense you have been telling us? What proof do you have that you have a brother?

Ram: The book, the photo, the letters.

Kumar: You have time till Babuji arrives—tell him the truth. If you dare tell a lie...

Ram: I am not staying.

Kumar: Go then, get out, go wherever you want. *(Ram exits.)*

Meena: Ramu can go away. Where can we go even if we want to? I think I am a part of the Professor's crowd. I am here in this luxurious apartment by accident and due to somebody's kindness.

Professor: The truth is that we all are in the same boat. We are dependent on somebody.

Kumar: No, Meena is referring only to me. But I don't agree. I am not a part of the crowd. I have no affinity with a person like Ramu. There is no comparison.

Professor: You know nothing about Ramu. I learnt today that Ramu is supporting two of his brothers in their studies.

Kumar: From where did these two other brothers crop up? The truth is out. He claimed they are only two brothers.

Meena: Can't you understand, he calls everyone his brother. You remember when we didn't get the permission to perform our play, Ramu got it through his brother.

Kumar: Is his brother some high official?

Meena: No, he is a mere clerk. But Ramu says that this brother of his runs the entire office. The whole office machinery comes to a standstill in his absence.

Kumar: This is somehow getting complicated. I feel we are unnecessarily exaggerating the matter. Ramu is our servant. Why write a play on him?

Professor: Kumar, I have written a lot in my life. But this play shall be written with complete devotion and belief. This shall be my masterpiece. I wouldn't regret even if I gave up writing altogether after this play.

Kumar: Have you considered the audience?

Professor: Every writer reaches a state of intellectual dilemma when the audience, the publisher, the reader all lose their significance for him. His thoughts, his convictions, his social commitments overshadow everything. Today I feel that I have reached that stage.

Kumar: You have not forgotten Babuji's wishes, I hope.

Professor: I am writing this play on his instructions.

(Babuji enters. He looks downcast.)

Professor: Back so soon? Was the train on time?

Babuji: I couldn't make it to the station. All the roads are blocked. There is a strike in downtown. I had to return halfway.

Kumar: Strike? What for?

Babuji: You don't need a reason for a strike. I had to meet this person urgently, but I couldn't. Many will be prevented from reaching the station, the patient his doctor, students going for exams, an applicant to an interview ... none of them will be able to reach their destination. The famine stricken won't get their food supplies. This is the result of a strike. Even we had gone on strikes, but never like...

Meena: Why, in those days didn't strikes inconvenience the people? Didn't food supplies get held up?

Babuji: *(ignoring the question)* There has to be a cause for a strike. There is no cause at present. All these strikes, bandhs, gheraos for no reason. I saw a notice on the way ... the entire city will be closed next week. These are all signs of fascism. Such things throw up a Hitler.

This country is going to the dogs. Anyway, let's forget all this. Despite all this, the show must go on. Now, Professor, the play.

Professor: I've collected relevant material on Shyam.

Babuji: Shyam, who's he?

Kumar: Ramu's brother, who else?

Babuji: How did this brother get into the act? Thought about the plot?

Professor: Not much about that. But at least, I have decided to write only about a man such as Shyam. Famine-stricken, he abandons his village for the city. No food, no shelter. Life a struggle. But he doesn't dream only of his daily bread. He wants to be an equal member of the society and, therefore, studies *Gandhivani.*

Babuji: I have been thinking of producing a totally experimental play. No sense. Nonsensical. Absurd. You know what the people want these days? Anti-poetry, anti-novel, anti-love story. This anti-play's anti-hero shall be Ramu.

Kumar: Can he play the role?

Babuji: A mere fortnight of working on him and you'll see...

Kumar: Ramu? In two weeks?

Babuji: Just watch. Ramu!

(Ram enters suddenly as though he had never exited, but had been there all along listening to their conversation.)

Babuji: Want to play the hero?

Ram: Yes sir,

Babuji: Can you dance?

Ram: Yes sir.

Babuji: What dance?

Ram: Monkey dance. (*begins to dance*).

Babuji: What are you called?

Ram: Hanuman. Hail Sri Ramchandra! Bol Siyapati Ramchandra ki Jai!

Babuji: Will you answer my questions?

Ram: At your service, sir.

Babuji: Who's this? *(pointing to Kumar)*.

Ram: He thinks he's a hero.

Babuji: But in fact?

Ram: A complete zero.

Babuji: Who's this? *(pointing to Professor)*

Ram: He thinks he is Shakespeare.

Babuji: But in fact?

Ram: Only a hired translator.

(Everyone is amused. Ram sits down.)

Professor: Great. We were not aware of this. Now my play will have immense possibilities.

Babuji: This is the director's magic *(to Kumar)*

Can you imitate him?

Kumar: No sir.

Babuji: Can you dance?

Kumar: No sir.

Babuji: What's your name?

Kumar: Hanuman. No, no, Ramchandra. No, no, Kumar.

Babuji: Well, Professor?

Professor: I am Rishi Valmiki ...

Babuji: Not your name! I am asking you about Kumar's ability.

Professor: After seeing Ramu, I am thinking ...

Babuji: I know what you are thinking. Don't mention Charlie Chaplin. Chaplin is dead. And he has had too many imitators. You just stick to your style. I want this fast, so we can perform before summer.

Professor: Fine, I'll take a week.

Babuji: All right, we meet here after seven days.

Kumar: But after seven days is the strike.

Babuji: I'll handle the strike. Now, Professor...

Professor: Very well, sir, *(hesistantly)* I needed some money.

(Babuji takes out his stuffed wallet and offers it to the Professor who reaches out for it.)

Babuji: I will let you have all this, *(withdrawing it)* but only when you have completed the play.

Professor: I need it urgently.

Babuji: Enough. That's that. *(Gets up. All follow suit).*

Ram: What about me?

Babuji: *(surveying the room)* Why is everything so dirty? I notice that lately you are becoming careless in your duties. Clean the house immediately. *(Ram starts collecting the peanut shells in a paper bag, Babuji goes in).*

Kumar: Sir, I am thinking of shifting to Bombay.

Professor: Why, have you got a job there?

Kumar: No, my talent is being stifled here. Everyone insults me. Everyone hates me. Especially Ramu. *(Goes to Ram)* Just what do you want?

Ram: I am going to clean up this place till everything is spick and span.

Kumar: Everything is going wrong just because of this play about you.

Ram: Not a small particle of dust will escape me. *(Professor on his way out lights a cigarette and hands over the packet to Kumar. Kumar again finds it empty. Irritated, he takes leave of Meena and exits. Ram is hard at work).*

Meena: Ramu, will you answer my questions?

Ram: Yes, why not?

(Babuji calls for Meena.)

Meena: Look, Babuji is calling me. Tell me honestly, where does Shyam live?

Ram: Sometimes in Mathura, sometimes in Dwarka, sometimes in Vrindavan.

Meena: Don't talk nonsense. Who are you?

Ram: I am Hanuman. My house is in Kishkindha. It is my life's ambition to serve Ramchandra. All glory to Sri Ramchandra. Bol Siyapati Ramchandra ki Jai.

Meena: I desperately need Shyam's address. *(Babuji calls out again. Meena on her way in stops. She gives some money to Ram from her purse)* You haven't eaten since yesterday. Please tell me, are you ...

Ram: *(rises with the paper bag in his hand)* I am Hanuman. My tail shall lengthen like a queue. I shall burn the golden city of Lanka. I shall exterminate the family of Ravana. *(Meena exits. Gradual darkness. Curtain.)*

Act Two

(A week later. Ram is alone, cleaning the room. Meena enters from inside.)

Meena: Who else was here?

Ram: No one. I was alone.

Meena: I heard someone talking.

Ram: I was talking to Shyam.

Meena: Shyam? Did he come?

Ram: Whenever I am alone, I talk to Shyam. I feel relieved.

Meena: I am dying to meet Shyam.

Ram: He'll be here soon.

Meena: How do you know?

Ram: In his last letter, he had written that the time is nearly ripe.

Meena: Please make sure that I get to meet Shyam.

Ram: When Shyam comes ...

(Just then Kumar enters.)

Meena: Yes, when Shyam comes?

(Ram remains silent.)

Kumar: Who is this Shyam?

Meena: Ramu's brother, who else?

Kumar: Why are we all so concerned about Shyam? It is now becoming irritating. All these discussions over a lie. I tell you, Shyam does not exist.

Ram: Shyam is my brother. He's told me, he'll be here very soon.

Kumar: When did he tell you? When did you meet him?

Meena: Ramu talks to Shyam when he is alone.

Kumar: When he is alone? How can that be?

Ram: I tell Shyam my problems. He knows everything about me.

Kumar: If you love your brother, have you tried to locate him? Have you informed the police? Have you advertised in the newspapers?

Ram: Shyam told me not to try to locate him. He will return when the time comes.

Kumar: When will that time come?

Ram: Soon.

Kumar: Nonsense. This Professor too hasn't arrived yet. All roads are blocked. I don't know whether he'll be able to make it.

Meena: All roads blocked? Must be the strike. But it is all calm and quiet in this part of the city. My home is as safe as a fortress; no outsider can come in.

Kumar: The main road was jampacked.

Meena: How did you come?

Kumar: I had to find my way through the crowds. You know how I felt? All shops, markets closed. Picketing on the roads. But the procession moved on. The sea of people continued to swell. Suddenly I felt that I should be with them. I belong there. My family, my job have no significance. They are all an illusion like our plays. I felt as if that procession was the ultimate truth.

Ram: *(to himself)* Shyam will come.

Meena: Then, why did you come? Why didn't you join the procession?

Kumar: I did a lot of thinking when I went home last week. About myself, about all of us, about our plays, about Ramu. Everything became topsy-turvy. I realised that I had no relation with the outside world, as though I was afraid of reality. I was afraid of confronting it. You are right. I put on a mask whenever I am faced with reality. Have you ever been faced with such a problem?

Meena: I have already told you that I am an Ahilya of stone. With no future. I have no demands, no desires. Neither for marriage nor for home. I am just looking for my moment of revenge. What about you?

Kumar: I want to revolt. I want to fight. I want to destroy everything.

Meena: You can express your protest through the Professor's play.

Kumar: No, not theatrical protests. I mean real protest.

Meena: Protest against what?

Kumar: Against everyone. Against society. Against education. Against law. Against power. Against one's own self. Protest for protest's sake.

Meena: All this anger is useless. Such sentimentality can have no purpose. You find rebels without cause only in films.

Kumar: Then what shall I do?

Meena: The moment of decision shall come again. Can you decide now not to retreat at that moment? *(Kumar remains silent. Just then the Professor enters. He appears excited.)*

Kumar: Thank God, you've come. What about the script?

Professor: The script is ready. Nothing can stop it now.

Meena: You didn't have any problems in coming here.

Professor: My kurta got torn in the crowd and I lost my walking stick.

Kumar: Not the script, I hope.

Professor: No, I saved that.

Kumar: Wasn't the main road very crowded?

Professor: I could have taken another route, but I wanted to study the mob psychology after having started this script. That day too I went by the station where the strikers had collected. As I mingled in the crowd, I had a new awareness. I realised that I had all along been moving in the wrong direction, I had been avoiding the crowd. But now I felt one with it. *(Kumar offers the Professor a cigarette, but he declines)* I realised that I had a common cause with the crowd. I realised that all my other objectives of life had been meaningless. Previously, the crowd was for me a faceless, shapeless assembly of people; but once with them, I realised that a mob was not an inanimate object—it was made of living, familiar people. I spied a neighbour who otherwise leads a dreary dull existence. I recognised two of my students whose

presence I had never felt in the classroom. They made me feel proud of them. I felt that the procession was endless. From one alley to another, from one road to another; from the village to the city; from the city to the capital. This journey shall only end at its destination.

(Babuji enters. All rise. He is visibly annoyed. All resume their seats after he is seated.)

Babuji: This strike is getting out of hand. Nobody is willing to listen. If it continues, life will become very difficult.

Meena: Was there any problem on the way?

Babuji: They smashed the windshield of my car.

Meena: Which car? The small one or the big one?

Babuji: It's not a question of a broken windshield. The insurance company will take care of that. I am amazed at their audacity.

Professor: Windshields will get smashed. Clothes will be torn. Many will betray. Some will prove difficult. But the procession will go on. *(Babuji looks at the Professor, surprised.)*

Babuji: Script?

Professor: Ready.

Kumar: You think we'll be able to do anything with all this trouble.

Babuji: This trouble will have to be curbed. What have you written?

Professor: About Shyam.

Babuji: *(not quite there; worried about the crowd outside)* Who is Shyam?

Ram: Shyam is my brother.

Meena: All crusaders against evil are brothers.

Ram: I saw my brother in my dream last night.

Meena: A new avatar was born.

Ram: Shyam was in a new dress.

Meena: In yellow clothes, he carried the conch, the chakra, the club and the lotus. A crown of peacock feathers on his head.

Ram: He had many followers.

Meena: The army of the Pandavas.

Ram: I was terrified.

Meena: Whenever religion declines and evil reigns supreme ...

Ram: He appeared before me.

Meena: He arrives to destroy the evil, and protects the good.

Babuji: Now, what drama is this? Professor, start, reading your script.

Professor: Dedication. My play is dedicated to Ramu and the other downtrodden ...

Babuji: Dedication later. First let us find out what you have written.

Professor: First Act. First Scene.

Babuji: How many sets?

Professor: Just one-the Rajpath.

Kumar: Rajpath or Janpath? Or where they intersect? One road at the crossing leads to the Past and the other towards the Future. The intersecting road takes you to the Present. All characters who dwell on these roads live in the respective periods of time. A youth on this side of the crossing transforms into an old man on the other side. What scope for acting!

Babuji: Shut up. Yes, Professor, how many hero-heroines?

Professor: This play has neither hero nor heroine.

Babuji: Will we have an empty stage?

Professor: I mean, not the conventional hero-heroines. The people of the road shall be my heroes.

Babuji: Excellent. What happens to Shyam?

Professor: Ram or Shyam. He is one of them. He is not a leader or hero in the traditional sense. He is just there.

Babuji: What'll happen on this road?

Professor: People are going and coming. Such people who constitute a majoritiy of our society. They spend their lives on this road. They are born, grow up and are left to die on this road.

Babuji: Tremendous.

Professor: First Act, First Scene. First, the set. The Rajpath of an anonymous town in this country.

Kumar: If you place a drain pipe on the road, people will recognise Bombay.

Professor: Here, life is complete in itself. The sun rises and sets on this road. Sometimes the wail of a newborn is heard, sometimes a howl for a dead one. The queue at the ration shop has crawled up to the road. People have gathered here to watch a film star alighting from his limousine. These people sometimes are thrashing eve-teasers; sometimes carrying a dying beggar to the hospital. Underneath the lamp post a fat ugly man stands smoking. A heavily made-up young girl seeks customers. The black marketeers transact their business in the dark; the keepers of law collect their hush money quietly. This is the day and the night of the Rajpath.

Babuji: Very good.

(The Professor goes to the window and looks out.)

Professor: Such was the road I visualised while writing, as though it's my entire life and not merely a road. *(The noise of the procession can be heard from the outside.)*

Babuji: Perhaps they have reached here. Ramu, go down and check the car. *(Ram goes.)*

Meena: The insurance people will compensate for any harm done to the car. But if something happens to Ramu, who will be responsible? But then who will harm Ramu?

Professor: This is exactly the situation I have taken in the first draft of my play, *(Returns from the window.)*

Babuji: Very good. But, the climax?

Professor: I am still working on the first draft. But I have roughly decided on the climax. The first part will show the poverty of the people of this road. The family of Ram and Shyam has gone through the heat, the cold, the rain, the hunger, the thirst, the dust of the zooming cars, the exploitation of the law keepers. The second part of the play has the procession. Ram and Shyam have joined it.

Babuji: Very exciting. But in the last scene...

Professor: In the last scene, a miracle. *(Gives a dramatic pause.)*

Babuji: What happens in the last scene? *(The Professor is silent.)*

Kumar: Did an earthquake wipe out the road?

Meena: Or nothing happened? Or was everybody left rooted on the road? Or did the sun just rise and set again?

Professor: No. The backdrop slid out.

Babuji: Excellent, excellent.

Meena: Just then, a flash of lightning and thunder boomed.

Professor: Behind the backdrop loomed the gate of a palace, just out of the blue.... There is a different sort of people on the other side of the gate. The Sethji, the owner of this house. His supporters, politicians, goondas. The gate is shut. Sethji's people are carrying sticks. In Sethji's hand is a gun. The politician is flanked by his hirelings. *(The Professor is now highly excited. Pauses)* Everything went topsy-turvy.

Meena: In the background, the bugles of the battle.

Professor: The procession stops at the gate. *(Babuji watches the procession from the window.)* The procession of the sick, the aged, the women and the children. Shyam is at its head.

Meena: The sound of a conch shell rends the air.

Professor: His hands are empty.

Meena: Except for the ...

Professor: Except for the *Gandhivani,* nothing else. In a second, nothing is left. Everything is swept up in the surging sea of the masses. Past, future, everything. Sethji, the official, the politician, the pimp, the goondas are swept away.

Meena: The army of the Kauravas retreats.

Professor: The people enter the palace.

Meena: There is a shower of petals from the heavens.

Babuji: Great. This play will bring about a revolution. *(Looks out.)*

Kumar: *(impressed)* Congratulations, sir! I shall be honoured to do even a bit role in this play. Today I am proud to be your student. Have a cigarette, sir. *(Offers one.)*

Professor: I have given up smoking.

Babuji: This is a great play.

Professor: My ultimate creation. The more I think about it, the deeper I sink into it. All this while, I have been surviving on foreign plays in translation. In the name of modern plays, I wrote trite dialogues as in the *Soliloquy of the Snowman* and thereby fooled myself and my audience.

Babuji: The critics have been accusing us of perpetuating a socially alienated theatre. This play will give them many a sleepless night.

Professor: Thank you. I have realised my duty towards the society. Whatever we did in the past had no relevance to our lives. We hear the shouting masses outside, while inside the auditorium we try to humour the selected few with the antics of a clown.

Babuji: This play will give a new direction.

Kumar: When do we begin rehearsals?

Babuji: Yes, we must also consider that. Professor, what's on your mind?

Professor: We could begin tomorrow. And with your permission, I'd like to direct the play myself. I feel that nobody else will be able to communicate my message.

Babuji: Fair enough.

Professor: Then, when can we begin?

Babuji: I have decided. *(Walks to the window.)*

Kumar: Very good.

Professor: I can begin right away.

(Babuji returns to his seat.)

Babuji: I have decided not to stage this play.

Professor: You mean, not just now.

Babuji: I mean never. You can stop further work on the play.

Professor: I can't beat a retreat now. I will stage this play. If not here, then somewhere else.

Babuji: You think you can stage this play if I don't want you to?

Professor: I will definitely complete it and stage this play. This play will be the symbol of my intellectual independence.

Babuji: You and independence? Some stupid slogans have turned your head. Look at yourself once again. You stay in what is my house. My mills clothe you; my factories supply you your pen and ink. I control your thoughts. You have mortgaged your whole being to me.

Professor: Thank you. But I have decided once for all to go ahead with this play.

Babuji: Then I will have to ask you to get out.

Professor: *(rises)* Many people have sacrificed everything for their principles. Namaskar.

Meena: Kumar, there comes a moment in a man's life when he has to decide.

(Kumar and the Professor look at each other. In agreement, they leave.) The first scene ends here.

Babuji: Only you are left.

Meena: Me, Ram and Shyam.

Babuji: Ramu, go and see where they have gone to. *(Ram goes out.)*

Meena: They will merge in the crowd, never to be found again.

Babuji: Won't you also go away?

Meena: No, I am like a bird. The cage is my sky. I will always stay there. I will hold on to the gilded cage; to my security. Till someone sets me free.

Babuji: Those two will also return to their cages. They don't know the vastness of the skies. They too are the birds of the cage.

Meena: I am a mistress.

Babuji: They are not any different. Like Ramu, my servants. No one can leave me.

Meena: Ram may not leave, but he might think of revenge.

Babuji: For revenge, it is necessary to have hatred. They are not capable of that. They can just talk of revolt. The Professor's writing is impotent anger. Kumar's protest is a melodramatic gimmick. And Ramu is a mere robot.

Meena: Like me. I am a different breed of robot. A puppet, a doll, whose eyes close when laid down.

Babuji: Those two will not be able to go far away.

Meena: This time they will not return. Such small incidents will add up to a great historical truth. These two will multiply into thousands.

Babuji: Know who Shyam is? Shyam is the ideal they all just dream of. Everyone dreams of a saviour. In times of trouble, God is remembered. But no redeemer comes. One has to be one's own saviour.

Meena: But Shyam will come.

Babuji: Nobody will come. By this evening, they will return here just as the strikers will go back to their homes. When they return, they will have their heads bent low. Are you listening to that shouting outside? All hollow slogans. Take the Professor. He talks of intellectual freedom and yet begs for a little money. Kumar is a young man with his whole future wide open before him. But he has mortgaged himself to me in return for some temporary security.

Meena: You forget one man. Who has nothing. No home. No family. No past. No future. No ambitions. No aims. That underdog of the society—Ramu.

Babuji: They'll all return. At the right time, they'll all return.

(As though echoing his words, the Professor and Kumar return with heads bowed. The Professor is smoking. Meena is shocked.)

Meena: You were right. We are all mistresses. *(goes in).*

Babuji: What if I refuse to accept you now?

Professor: We have no place to go. We are *trishankus.* There is a curfew clamped outside. We are stranded. The life of the strikers is endangered. We have realised that is not our place. We belong here.

Babuji: Kumar, do you know your place now.

Kumar: I am Hanuman. *(kneeling)* To serve Shri Ramchandra is my duty.

Babuji: And you, Professor?

Professor: I am Shakespeare. No, no, I am a mere translator. I have no originality.

Babuji: Whatever you have written so far …

Professor: … Is useless. I will tear· it all up.

Babuji: No need to destroy. I'll purchase it. *(The Professor hands the script to Babuji, who throws some notes from his wallet. The Professor, on his hands and knees begins collecting them. Kumar is shocked.)*

Kumar: Sir …

Professor: You were never my student. I was never your teacher.

Babuji: I want a new script within seven days.

Professor: It will be done. As you like it. *(Meena enters, she has been crying.)*

Meena: Where is Shyam?

Professor: Shyam doesn't exist.

Meena: Where is Ram?

(Ram comes in. Unafraid. Looks at Professor and Kumar with pity.)

Ram: Now I'll have to call Shyam.

Babuji: Where were you for such a long time?

Ram: I was looking for Shyam.

Babuji: Shut up. Shyam doesn't exist.

Ram: Then I'll have to do it alone.

Babuji: What do you mean?

Ram: I am Ram. I will go to Lanka and destroy the family of Ravana. And my brother Shyam shall vanquish all evils at Kurukshetra.

Babuji: Did you clean the room?

Ram: I shall clean up everything.

(Babuji is looking for an excuse to rebuke Ram, he notices the paper bag.)

Babuji: One week's passed and this paper bag is still lying here. *(Ram laughing picks up the bag. Babuji is getting angrier)* For so many days …

(Ram comes to Babuji. Blows up the paper bag and bursts it in Babuji's face. The bag is empty. Babuji's flushed with anger. Amusement on Ram's face. Suddenly an explosion is heard outside. Curtain.)

Act Three

(Seven days later. Kumar and Meena are in the room.)

Meena: We have been here for quite some time. You haven't uttered a word.

Kumar: It is very hot today.

Meena: I know. Won't you say something else.

Kumar: The procession is swelling.

Meena: I am not talking about the procession.

Kumar: There is no sign of its abating. I don't think we'll be able to put on a play this time.

Meena: I am not talking about the play. I am referring to the two of us.

Kumar: Where is Babuji?

Meena: Resting. You wanted to tell me something the other day.

Kumar: Much water has flown under the bridge since.

Meena: Today, I want to say something to you.

Kumar: Since then, I have become a permanent employee of Babuji.

Meena: If I tell you ...

Kumar: I have written to my parents that I would marry the girl of their choice.

Meena: Oh! I get it now. There is no salvation for you.

(Kumar hangs his head. Babuji enters and at a glance comprehends the situation.)

Babuji: Why are you so quiet? Where is the Professor?

Kumar: There is a lot of tension outside.

Babuji. How did you manage to come?

Kumar: I took a longer route. I'll just go and find the Professor.

Babuji: He's bound to come. He needs money.

Meena: We all need something or the other. Kumar wants a promotion. I want a new sari.

Babuji: The world lives on such needs.

Kumar: Can we do the play in such chaotic conditions?

Babuji: Why not? Has the strike stopped anything? The crowds in the hotels? The audience for the films? The lovers on the river side? Only the idle ones participate in these strikes. Everything else remains normal.

Meena: The only inconvenience is that we have to use the small car instead of the big one.

(The Professor enters. He is out of breath having climbed up the stairs. He is carrying a walking stick and a notebook in his left hand and a pen in his right hand. A cigarette in his mouth. He proceeds to read from his notebook.)

Professor: Today, I took a lonely route. On the way here, I came across two people who were ahead of me. They had probably lost their way. One of them remarked ...

Babuji: What did you write in your notebook?

Professor: *(referring to the notebook)* Writers are tape recorders. *(realising his mistake)* This time, I didn't note their dialogues, because they had no literary significance.

Babuji: What were they talking about?

Professor: They were talking of bloodshed.

Babuji: Whose blood?

Meena: Bloodshed in the Crusade at Kurukshetra. Shyam had said so explicitly.

Professor: May be Ram said this. In the context of the Ramayan. Because Shyam doesn't exist.

Babuji: Correct. What did you see outside?

Professor: I came the other way. I got the impression that they were coming here.

Babuji: What do you think? What is going to happen?

Professor: This country is going to the dogs.

Babuji: And the result?

Professor: Nothing. Everything will be normal. I shall again write fairy tales and people will flock to see them.

Babuji: And then?

Professor: Nothing.

Meena: What will happen to Shyam?

Kumar: Didn't you hear, Shyam doesn't exist. I have been proved right.

Meena: But Ram is there.

Babuji: Where is Ramu? Ramu ...

Professor: Ramu ...

Kumar: Ramu ...

(Ram enters. He places a paper bag on the centre table. All look at it curiously.)

Ram: Shyam has arrived. This is his gift for you.

I will go and bring him in presently. *(Ignoring Babuji's commands, he goes away. Kumar looks out of the window.)*

Kumar: The procession has arrived.

Meena: *(goes to the window)* Who is leading them?

Kumar: I have never seen such a big crowd.

Meena: Where is Shyam?

Kumar: They are armed with lathis.

(The Professor, conscious of Babuji's glare, drops his stick.)

Babuji: Kumar, come here. Let's listen to the Professor's script.

Meena: The last scene of the play is being enacted down there.

Babuji: Meena, close that window.

(All sit down. Everyone is visibly excited with the exception of Babuji.)

Kumar: One doesn't know what's going to happen.

Babuji: Nothing will happen. Professor, begin. *(The Professor takes out all the paper from his bag and looks for the script.)*

Meena: Once upon a time, there was a prince.

Kumar: There will be real trouble today.

Meena: The evil ones conspired and ousted him.

Kumar: The people are charged today.

Meena: The prince dreamt of his royal palace.

Kumar: The huge masses on one side and a mere handful on the other.

Meena: But the giant will have to be killed first.

Kumar: Today, there may be bloodshed.

Meena: But the life of the giant lies sealed in a casket seven seas away. How to kill him? *(The Professor continues his search for the script.)*

Professor: I have lost my script.

Kumar: Let's postpone the play.

Babuji: No, everything will proceed according to schedule.

Meena: The prince will come riding on his white charger.

Professor: I have lost my script.

Babuji: This won't work. The play will be staged as per announcement. I shall arrange everything. This procession will stop. The roads will be cleared for my car.

Professor. Maybe I'll find the script too.

Babuji: Don't forget where you stand.

Professor: Behind you.

Kumar: *(to Professor)* And I come after you. We have nothing to be afraid of. We are all behind Babuji. The Lord leads, the master and the pupil follow suit.

Meena: But I am with Babuji. Not following him. My head rests in his lap.

Babuji: Meena!

Meena: Riding the magic horse.

Professor: Where will Ramu be?

Kumar: The lowliest one. Behind everybody, at the tail end.

Meena: The prince will confront the giant outside the castle.

Kumar: Where has Ramu gone to? I hope the people outside won't create any trouble.

Babuji: Don't be afraid. This room is our castle. We have to defend it with all our might.

Professor: The tradition and culture of the castle will have to be defended.

Kumar: With our life and blood. We have to sacrifice our whole entity.

Meena: I will sacrifice my chastity to defend the castle.

Babuji: Mere talk won't do. Mere words are no substitute for power.

Professor: *(from his notebook)* Power grows out of the barrel of a gun.

Babuji: The fortress is endangered. We should think how best to defend the fortress.

(All consider the situation. Suddenly, they become conscious of the paper bag.)

Professor: What is in this packet?

Meena: This is Shyam's gift for us.

Kumar: Last month, in that bank hold-up, three masked men entered with a similar packet. They placed it on the counter and declared that the time bomb in the packet would explode in fifteen minutes. Within a minute, all the people cleared out in panic.

Professor: Later on, they found only a bouquet of flowers in the packet. But the dacoits escaped with the money.

Babuji: Kumar, just open that packet.

(Hesistantly Kumar goes to the packet, but lacking courage, returns.)

Kumar: A time bomb. I can hear it ticking.

(All are silent. A tick tick can be heard, possibly from the wall clock.)

Babuji: So, the time has come. No further delay in the plan of action.

Professor: *(still lost in thought)* I've got it. The defence of the fortress in three acts. The set—this very room and its furniture. With a few alterations here and there.

(Shifts a sofa. Stops just in time from touching the table with the packet on it.)

Babuji: Spell out your plan quickly.

Professor: The defence of the castle in three acts. In the first act, mere signs of external attack.

Kumar: The noise outside is increasing.

Professor: Second Act. The Commander-in-Chief turns traitor.

Kumar: Ramu is the one missing now.

Professor: And in the final Act *(looks at all of them)* the destruction of this man in a very special manner.

Babuji: How?

Kumar: That's my responsibility. It is my duty to defend this castle.

Babuji: The time has come. Talk less. Work more.

Professor: I need seven days for the script. We can name it. "The Last Frontier" or ...

Babuji: Not in seven days. Now. Right now.

Kumar: I shall kill that traitor Ramu.

Babuji: How much time do you need?

Kumar: Not time, boss, money. Five thousand rupees.

Professor: I need that money. Five thousand for my script.

Kumar: Just five thousand to eliminate Ramu.

Meena: This will be done free.

Professor: My script is not available free.

Kumar: Who will kill a man for nothing?

Meena: I'll do it. By making love to Ramu.

Kumar: This is no way to kill.

Meena: When he begins to believe in my love and trusts me, I shall disclose all to him.

Professor: There is no climax in this.

Meena: Ramu will die of desperate sorrow and five thousand rupees will be saved.

Professor: If you can kill with love, then you can do so with the pen also. The pen is mightier than the sword.

Kumar: I read about a Chinese pen. It is really a pistol which looks like a pen. *(The Professor checks on his pen; but is disappointed.)*

Babuji: Now, we have three plans. First, Kumar's plan—to murder Ramu. Second, Meena's plan—to kill with love. Third, the Professor's plan—the destruction of Ramu through his writings. Now to prepare a master plan with a combination of all the three.

(Takes away the Professor's pen and gives it to Kumar. Kumar inspects it. Then holds it like a pistol. Carefully, passes it on to Meena.)

Meena: *(dramatically turning it on the others)* Hands up!

(All put up their hands. Just as Meena turns, she finds Ram/Shyam standing before her. Ram/Shyam clad in army fatigues. As though Ram/Shyam's personality has undergone a transformation. Meena drops the pen) Shyam? *(to others, embarrassed)* Hands down.

(All sit down, Meena goes up to Ram/Shyam and invites him to sit. Ram/Shyam remains unmoved. His conviction shines in his eyes.)

Babuji: We must resolve this situation. *(Kumar makes to move towards window; Babuji stops him.)*

Ram/Shyam: It shall be resolved exactly at six p.m.

Babuji: Yes, the moment of decision has arrived. Now for action. Plan number One.

Kumar: Ram or Shyam. You really talk big. I am going to put an end to your nonsense. *(He is talking loudly, but is scared.)*

Ram: None will survive. Neither the buyers, nor the bought.

Kumar: Come here. *(He is shouting but the rebellious Ram/Shyam stands steady. Kumar hesitantly approaches him and raises his hand to give him a blow. Effortlessly, Ram/Shyam stops him. Kumar falls down.)*

Babuji: Plan number Two. *(Meena holds Shyam's hand).*

Meena: Hero. A real hero. Shyam, you descended on Kurukshetra to annihilate the evil and protect the good. *(Ram/Shyam is unmoved. Meena goes to him)* You are my Shyam. I am your Meera. Lure me with the melodies of your flute.

(She sings a Meera bhajan.)

Bhaju mana charan kamal avinasi
Jetai deese dharan gagan beech
Tetai sab uthi dasi
Araj karoon abala kara jorey

Shyam tumhari dasi
Meera ke prabhu giridhara naagar
Kato jam ki phansi

You still cannot recognise your Meera? But I can comprehend you fully. You are Vishnu among the Adityas. Surya among the Jyotishkas. Mareechi among the Maruts. Chandrama among the Tarikas. You are Sam among the Vedas. Indra among the Devatas. Mana among the Indriyas. Chetna among the Jeevas. You are Shankara among Rudras. Pavak among Vasus. Meru among Parvats. Parth Vrihaspati among Purodhas. Skand among Senanis. Samudra among Sarasis. You are Bhrigu among Rishis. Om among the Shabdas. Japa among the Yajnas. Himalaya among the Sthavaras. You are Vajra among Astras. You alone are Samay among Mapakas. Time among all measures.

Ram/Shyam: Yes, I am Time. All-consuming Time. I shall destroy everything.

Babuji: All-consuming Time? Time?

Kumar: Time bomb. Judgement at six. It's ten to six now.

Babuji: Plan number Three.

(The Professor shrugs as he gets up. Asks Kumar for a cigarette. Kumar offers the packet of cigarettes, but on second thoughts, gives him only one. The Professor takes a dramatic posture beside Ram/Shyam.)

Professor: Ram Babu. Shyam Babu. Come, let's complete the play. *(Babuji goes inside.)*

Ram: What will the play be about?

Professor: I will demonstrate the importance of the laws of nature. If people do not play their allotted roles and if they exchange places, nature's balance will be destroyed. I shall compel acceptance of the prevailing situation. I will draw such examples that people will readily believe in their fates and meekly accept all injustice. Now, come on.

Ram/Shyam: Now, I have nothing to say to anyone.

Professor: It does not matter. A writer has a perennial asset. That is his imagination. I will paint the character in such a way that all will detest him. You will be alienated. You do not comprehend my writing.

It shall become a sharp-edged sword. It will shoot out fire. Every letter a spark. Every word a volcano. Sometimes, while writing, some characters overpower me. Like the snowman. At one time, he began toying with me. I escaped him soon, however, and put him on top of a peak. If I had wanted, I could have left him there. I controlled his life and death. I hold the strings of my characters. I dictate them. I give them birth and life, and destroy them at will. I will destroy you completely.

(Babuji enters, clad as a common man—Charlie Chaplin? Puts an arm around Ram/Shyam's shoulder.)

Babuji: No, no one can harm Ram. He is my brother.

Meena: Shyam is Ramu's brother.

Babuji: Ram has many brothers. We are all Ram's brothers. Shyam is also my brother. Famine-stricken we had come to the city. Now, we will return to our village.

Meena: All lies!

Babuji: Together, we'll go down. To mingle with the masses. Come. *(Ram/Shyam doesn't move.)*

Ram/Shyam: I have to be present here at six o'clock.

(All eyes on the packet.)

Kumar: Six to six.

Babuji: No, we must go outside. *(To Ram/Shyam)* Come. *(Ram/Shyam stands rooted. To himself)* At six sharp. And only five minutes left. Inside, a time bomb. Outside the excited masses. *(goes in).*

Meena: No one will escape. All will go up in flames; everything will be destroyed. All those who have no right to live, all those hirelings, all those mortgaged to money.

Kumar: Sir, what will you do?

Professor: *(opening the notebook)* Maybe, a way can be found.

Kumar: It's not that simple. You really have to search for it. Sir, what are you thinking? Should we remain here or go out?

Professor: Where would Babuji go?

Kumar: He has already left, through the rear exit. Think of us now, sir.

Professor: There is nothing left to say now. The time has come. The play has ended.

Kumar: No.

Professor: All actors now await the curtain call.

Kumar: Sir, just three minutes more. This is no time for dramatics.

Professor: What gains? What losses? What memories? What lingering shadows of the past.

Kumar: Sir, we must decide quickly.

Professor: Those with us and those left behind. Promises kept, promises unfulfilled. All that time snatched away.

Kumar: Sir, please, not time, but the time bomb. *(Professor snaps out of his trance).* Sir, please tell us what to do. Even Babuji has escaped. *(Both are worried. Just then Babuji, in a military uniform, Hitler?—enters.)*

Babuji: *(consulting watch)* Two minutes more.

Kumar: Here, inevitable death. Outside, a pitched battle. *(Babuji looks out of the window. His face is flushed with victory. Returns.)*

Babuji: Yes, this is my battle. They are all my soldiers. I am their General.

(Kumar and the Professor take their position behind Babuji. All three march out. Meena rises. Will she follow them? No. She moves towards Ram/Shyam and both sit down. As though they have arrived at a decision. On their faces pity and hatred for those who have gone. Sure of themselves and ready to face the future. As if waiting for six o'clock. Gradually, they fade into the dark. Just a ray of light on the packet. That too, slowly, dims out. Only the ticking of the clock. Curtain.)

Director's Note

Ravi Baswani

Somewhere in the middle of the 1970s, I was approached to act in a play co-starring Banwari Taneja (an old friend) and Pankaj Kapoor, today's veteran film actor and sensational teenage idol Shahid Kapoor's father. All this in Delhi.

The other thing which attracted me to giving my assent to the project was the content and treatment of the play. The play was *Sabse Neeche ka Aadmi* (The Underdog). This was my first—albeit indirect-interaction with JP.

The one-to-one meeting held further surprises. What was this tall, not-so-very dark, handsome man doing in the Indian Administrative Service?!! Surely writers and poets are supposed to be doddering old men!!

JP also ought to have been in films - he would surely have cut a mighty fine figure, prancing around trees singing merrily or bashing the daylights out of the nasty villains!

But then such is the lot of all us artistes! (Please forgive me for audaciously including myself in such a list!) 'Doomed' to be in the wrong place all the time!

He, however, chose to defy such a destiny and soon quit the civil servant's job (There is a GOD!) and ever since, has single-mindedly pursued his passion – writing poetry and stories and plays.

But I digress - back to the play...

The play happened and went away. JP mentioned that on his last play's - Suryast (Before the Sunset), I think-opening night, he had

stated working on his next play right away; unfortunately, that hadn't happened this time since he was not very happy with the direction, and the play could not get out of his system. This had me worried; so, a few years later, I directed the very play and to my utter satisfaction, a day later, JP informed me that the previous night, he had begun working on his new play!!

He surprised me again shortly thereafter, when he agreed that I could translate that play into English! After I translated the play it was published first in the Enact, a theatre magazine published from New Delhi, and later, in book form. So, whatever I have indulged in ever since, the blame lies entirely with Mr. Das!

He has all these years, remained a godfather to me. Always warm, encouraging, counseling.

For which, my eternal thanks, JP.

ABSURD PLAY

"If only you kept on good terms with time," said the Mad Hatter, "he'd do almost anything you liked with the clock."

Alice in Wonderland

Picture overleaf

Nyasa artists
in *Arre* (Hindi)
Bhopal, 2008

Absurd Play

Introduction

Jaydev Taneja

Life in Europe after the Second World War had become listless, without a cause or any logic, thereby giving rise to absurd play. This fundamentally changed the story arrangement, characterisation, dialogues, structure and presentation of plays and its features, purpose and outcome became completely different. That well known and world famous dramatists like Beckett, Genet, Ionesco, Pinter and Albee would not have impacted the Indian drama and theatre, was a near impossibility. In Hindi, this started with Bhuvaneshwar in *Taambe ke Keede* (1946) and continued in the 1970s with playwrights like Vipin Kumar Agarwal, Lakshmikant Verma, Shambhunath Singh, and Satyavrat Sinha. But in Odia, after Manoranjan Das, probably it is Jagannath Prasad Das's play which is the only remarkable work in the new form of absurd plays. It was written around 1979 when absurd play was ruling the roost in almost all Indian languages. In Odia, the word 'Udbhat' signifies absurd. This was the reason why initially the play was published in an Odia magazine, as *Udbhat Natak*. Then the most important Indian theatre journal in English Enact published an English translation and thereafter in 1989 it was published with the title *Absurd Play* from Kolkata.

Like any other absurd play, along with the illogical narrative and dialogues and the unrealistic characters, life's dispiritedness, despondency, endless wait and worthlessness etc. are there in this play also, but it has something more beyond all this. The main view here is

to understand and tell about the difficult relationship between time and reality.

'Kaal' or time and death and the wait have been subjects that have attracted the writers from the very beginning. A number of J.P. Das's poems pertain to this subject. But basically the fundamental and important question that '*Kaal*', '*Samay*', '*Waqt*' or '*time*' is so formless and complicated that the thinkers both from the Orient and the West, despite trying to answer this since time immemorial, have not been able to come to a universally accepted conclusion.

Jagannath Prasad Das has tried to understand the fundamental form, nature, behaviour and process of 'time' minutely and in order to present its different forms of relationship with the world and life at a dramatic level has written this *Absurd Play*. For him, to present this serious and subtle philosophical-scientific subject and its unfathomable paradoxical character the medium of unrealistic was the only way out. Therefore, the place in the play is uncertain. At times it is the railway platform, airport, parties or something else where some characters could wait, meet each other and come and go.

The play begins with the conversation between a middle aged man and an old man regarding time. Then there comes a girl who has run away from home and is waiting for her lover and the train on the platform. A youth comes there but he is not the lover of the girl. Another girl who appears to be the mirror image of the first one comes. The man whose face resembles a clock talks of being in the fancy dress, but actually he is the symbol of time and the calendar which can see the past, present and future and also show a perspective of time. The middle aged person is the dramatist and the young man becomes his steno. The opening scene comes back again. The young man suggests to the playwright that in order to write a good play, "You have to make the events happen. You will have to create the cycle of events with the persons who come here." Thereafter the fundamentally unconnected structures created by J.P. Das come into action and in order to provide entertainment he uses his well experimented weapon 'pistol' to create suspense (something he had used earlier in *Suryast* and *Sabse Neeche ka Aadmi*). A suspicious-

looking policeman comes to catch the thief. Dialogues such as 'Rejuvenation tablet', 'Is the Hon'ble Judge there?' are repeated over and over again. The dramatist in his zeal to tackle the complexity of measuring the time even uses the age-old story of Vishnu and Narad and explains the phenomenon of *Maya* (illusion). The middle aged person quotes Einstein and negates the material authority of time and believes that the division between past, present and future is an illusion and nothing else. Then he attempts to define time with a quotation from St. Augustine. The girls want to forcefully take the young man away. Police fires a round and from nowhere the clock-like man comes in between and the clock dies. In the beginning of the second act/scene, the dead clock-like man gets up and takes out his mask and then one realises that actually it is the young man who was acting like 'time' (clock), just as everyone else was. The young man and the middle aged man again engage in a principled discussion on absurd plays and then about time. Then again, the first scene comes back. There is an investigation into the 'murder of time'. Proceedings of law begin. Everyone believes himself to be the killer. Not finding the correct way to take the play forward and also in order to end it with a powerful climax the last portion of the first act is repeated. The dead 'clock' gets up and takes out his mask. This time it is the old man. The old man continues to laugh for a very long time keeping the mask of the 'clock' in his hand and the play ends there.

In the play, at one place, the young man tells the middle aged man/dramatist, "I know. You are a traditional playwright, but you are acting like an absurd dramatist." This was the reason why despite reading Ionesco! Albee, Genet and Beckett and idolising them, J.P. Das's *Absurd Play* is not completely patterned on the western practice of absurd dramas, rather it is an Indian absurd play. The coming back again and again of dialogues, contexts, situations and scenes reinforces the recurring character of time just like the past, present and future are all part of the same garland. In the context of time, the reality of the world is meaningless and truth is without any logic. Time (clock) appears to be dead in front of reality, yet it is still alive—laughing away and making faces at us.

Absurd Play

Cast: Old Man, Middle-aged Man, Girl-I, Clockface, Young Man, Girl-II, Police

Act One

(When lights come, one sees a bare stage with a few stools scattered about. The old man—OM—moves about, sitting for a while on a stool and moving away again, as if unhappy with the seat. He now shuts his eyes and appears to be meditating. A good deal of time passes. The old man is now sleeping.

A *middle aged man—MAM—comes. He sits next to* OM. *Checks up whether* OM is *alive or dead. He speaks out to him loudly.)*

Mam: Excuse me, Sir.

(OM *does not reply.* MAM *repeats his question a little louder.* OM *is silent.* MAM *places his watch near* OM's *ears.* OM *now gets up with a start.)*

Om: What time is it now?

Mam: Twenty-five minutes.

Om: Twenty-five minutes past which hour?

Mam: How can I say? My watch does not have the hour hand.

Om: How do you find out the time then?

Mam: Finding out the minutes only is fine for me. Like for some people knowing the hour is enough. When you ask for the time some would say, twenty five minutes past four. No one says, it is twenty five minutes past four o'clock on the seventeenth day of the month of August in the year nineteen hundred and seventy nine. Certain things are said, the rest are understood. Even if my watch had an hour hand, how would you know if it was the time of the day or the night?

Om: But then what time is it now?

Mam: Twenty-five minutes and thirty seconds.

Om: But you said just now....

Mam: Thirty-one seconds.

Om: That means...

Mam: Thirty-two seconds.

Om: Oh, no I meant...

Mam: Thirty-three seconds.

Om: I mean to say...

Mam: Thirty-four seconds.

Om: You can't be...

Mam: Thirty-four seconds.

Om: How can that be?

Mam: Thirty-four seconds; thirty-four seconds. Because my watch has stopped! (*The clock strikes outside.*)

Om: How will you know the time then?

Mam: Why is it necessary to know the time? *(They are busy talking and miss the chiming of the clock. The clock, however, keeps chiming for some time after they have stopped talking.)*

Om: If you don't need to know the time, why do you carry a watch? Now look at me. I am very conscious of time and that is why I do not carry a watch.

Mam: If you are so particular about time, then tell me what hour the clock now struck outside.

Om: I didn't pay attention. But even if I had, it would not have helped. As your watch has no hour-hand, the clock has no chime to tell about the minutes.

Mam: You are a strange fellow, indeed. You carry no watch, but want to know about the time. This is like having your legs in two boats. Or else, hunting with the hounds and running with the rabbits.

Om: You don't understand me. I don't want to know about fixed time or current time. I want to know about absolute time—because the phenomena of electrodynamics as well as of mechanics possess no properties corresponding to the idea of absolute rest.

Mam: I don't think I got you right. Could you please repeat? (OM, *however, shuts his eyes and goes off to sleep.* MAM *hovers around him for some time and then goes over and sits on a stool a little away from him. A girl, let's call her* G-1, *comes inside.*)

G-I: (*to* MAM) When will the train come?

Mam: What train?

G-I: Aren't you waiting for the train?

Mam: No. I was simply taking a walk. I didn't even know that this is a railway station.

G-I: Did you meet anyone else here?

Mam: Was someone expected?

G-I: Yes. (*Looks at her watch*) He should have been here by now. (*Whispers to* MAM) We are eloping.

Mam: Where will you go to?

G-I: Don't know. We have simply decided to get on the train and get off wherever we feel like. But he should have come quite some time back.

Mam: (*Points at* OM) Is that your man? (G-I *goes over and closely looks at the sleeping old man.*)

G-I: Could have been. But he has no sense of time. Has come forty years too late.

Mam: What will you do now?

G-I: I'll wait. I only hope the train does not arrive before he does.

Mam: If you don't mind...

G-I: No, thank you. I want to have a little quiet now.

Mam: I only wanted to know who you are, who that other man is and ...

G-I: That's something personal.

(She walks away and sits at a distance.)

Mam: *(to himself)* It looks as if my work will not get done. If one is mad, the other refuses to talk.

(A young man—YM—comes. He looks hesitant and a little scared. He looks about him and stands as if not knowing what to do. MAM *goes to G-I and whispers)*

Mam: He has come.

G-I: Who has come?

(MAM *points at the young man.)*

G-I: No, he is not my man.

(She takes out a photograph from her purse and compares.)

No, he is not my man at all. Please do not bother me now. (G-I *starts reading a book.* MAM *comes away from the girl and goes near the young man.)*

Mam: So what brings you here?

Ym: Sixty per minute.

Mam: *(to himself)* That's strange! Everyone is talking about time. Is this a watch repair shop?

(Another person enters now. He has a mask on his face, a mask shaped like the face of a clock, except that the dial has no hands. Let's call him clockface or simply CLOCK.)

Clock: Is it the right place?

Mam: Yes, it is. The repair-man is sleeping over there. *(Points at* OM)

(CLOCK *goes and wakes up* OM. OM *gets up with a start and looks at his face. Standing at a distance* MAM *tries to over-hear their conversation.)*

Om: No, I don't understand it even now.

Clock: What's that again?

Om: Time. What is time. How is it that a moment of Brahma's life is sixty thousand years on the earth? But why should I be talking to you about this? You are a big zero; a cipher. Like your face. Someone has the minute hand and someone has the chime. But you have neither. You have only a mask.

Clock: You mean this is not your house?

Om: I am waiting.

Clock: Since how long? For whom?

Om: How do I know? What do I know of time? And then, how will he come unless it is time for him to come?

Clock: Who will come?

Om: Unless he comes and I see him, how do I know who it is ? That is why I am keen to know the correct time.

Clock: In that case, I think I have come to the wrong place.

Om: It is quite possible that this is the right place, but you have come at the wrong time. Either before time ...

Clock: Does it mean that the party has not started?

Om: Or after time.

Clock: Does it mean that the party is over ?

Om: So long as you are not in the party, how does it matter if you are early or late? (OM *goes to his seat, lies down and goes off to sleep.)*

Ym: *(to* MAM) Excuse me, Sir, may I bother you for a minute?

Mam: What is it now? Sixty minutes per second, isn't it?

Ym: No, Sir, It's sixty words.

Mam: How do you mean? A minute has sixty words and not sixty seconds?

Ym: That's right, Sir. Sixty words per minute. A word a second.

(It strikes seven outside.)

Mam: It struck seven. Does it mean seven seconds or seven words?

Clock: May be the party is over.

Ym: Excuse me, Sir, but I only wanted to say that I can type sixty words a minute. *(It strikes one.)*

Clock: *(anxious)* It is getting late every minute. *(To* MAM) Are you sure that this is not the fancy dress party?

Mam: Do we look like people in fancy dress?

Clock: Why not? You look like a modern day middlee aged man, but you may be the magic deer from the *Ramayana.* You are in the fancy dress of a middle-aged man.

Mam: *(pointing to* YM) And him?

Ym: Let me introduce myself. I am in reality a robot from an American science-fiction film. I am here in answer to an advertisement in the newspaper, in the garb of an unemployed young man who has done a shorthand-typing-secretarial course and can type sixty words a minute.

Mam: (*to* CLOCK) And pray, what is your disguise?

Clock: *(whispers)* Shh! Don't tell anyone that I have come disguised as Time.

Mam: How can that be? You don't even wear a wrist watch!

Clock: That's the real secret. What fun is a disguise otherwise? Please, Sir, look at yourself. Who can say that you are a golden deer? You have changed your voice too with your disguise. Though you are now seated, I know that you can easily stand up on your two legs and start walking like a man. And looking at you, no one—not even Ravana himself—can know who you really are!

(When he is talking, YM *is taking notes.* CLOCK *looks at him now.*

And this young man ...

Ym: Yes, sir. The last line: though you are now seated, comma, I know that you can easily stand up on your two legs and start walking like a man, full stop. And looking at you, comma, no one, dash, not even Ravana himself, dash, can know who you really are, exclamation mark.

Clock: You know nothing.

Ym: I know everything, Sir. You, Sir, are my provider. You are the one who put in the ad. All this was a test for me. But I am sure, Sir, that I have noted down everything correctly.

(YM *gets a hold on* CLOCK's *feet.* CLOCK *tries to pull out, but* YM *holds faster. Seeing no way out ...*)

Clock: All right. Take down now .

(YM *leaves him and opens his note book to write. In the meantime,* CLOCK *runs out.*)

Mam: You let him go?

Ym: I know, my lord and master. It is you who was taking my test. You are my provider. You know everything, Sir.

Mam: I know nothing. I do not even know why in a pack of cards the king of diamonds, the jack of hearts and the jack of spades have one eye each when all others have two!

Ym: I know, Sir.

Mam: No, I am no magic deer. But we can come to some terms. As a matter of fact I need a secretary as much as you need a provider. Can you handle everything right?

Ym: You've seen proof of it already.

Mam: All right. Take down now. *(Dictates slowly)* The phenomena of ...

(YM *does not write.* MAM *waits for him to write.)*

Ym: Please continue, Sir.

Mam: Please read out what you have written.

Ym: The phenomena of electrodynamics as well as of mechanics possess no properties corresponding to the idea of absolute rest.

Mam: All right. All right. That'll do. I wanted someone like you. Come closer.

(YM *comes and sits near him.)*.

After having seen you, I am hopeful of completing the work in six months.

Ym: *(Takes out a card from his pocket and having a close look at it)* Which means we have to finish it by the Seventeenth February, Sunday.

Mam: What is that?

Ym: That is an eternal calendar. You can find out any date from 1752 A.D. from this calendar.

Mam: I employ you from this very minute. I am sure you'll be a great help to me. Who do you think I am ?

Ym: Whatever else you may be, I am certain you are a playwright.

Mam: *(surprised)* How did you guess?

Ym: The seriousness with which you quoted Einstein convinced me that the quotation had made a tremendous appeal to you and that you were going to use it in your next play.

Mam: You are right. I am a playwright. I am going to write a new play in six months' time.

Ym: What will be the subject of the play?

Mam: It will be about a playwright who is on the lookout for a suitable plot to write a play, and wandering about, has finally landed himself in a strange place.

Ym: I follow you perfectly, Sir.

Mam: When the playwright, who is a middle-aged man and whom we may call MAM in the play, arrives, he finds only an old man

sitting there. Now start taking down. Act One. Within brackets. When lights come, one sees a bare stage with a few stools scattered about. The old man—OM—moves about, sitting for a while on a stool and moving away again as if unhappy with the seat. He now shuts his eyes and appears to be meditating. A good deal of time passes. The old man is now sleeping. A middle-aged man—MAM—comes. He sits next to OM. Checks up whether OM is alive or dead. He speaks out to him loudly. Bracket closed. MAM: Excuse me, sir. Within brackets: OM does not reply. MAM repeats his question a little louder. OM is silent. MAM places his watch near OM's ears. OM now gets up with a start. Bracket closed. OM: What time is it now? MAM: Twentyfive minutes. Did you take down all that correctly? Now read out what you have written down.

Ym: Let me read out the last portion only. Within brackets. YM opens his notebook to take dictation. In the meantime, CLOCK runs out. Bracket closed. MAM: You let him go, question mark. YM: I know, comma, my lord and master, full stop. It is you who was taking my test, full stop. You are my provider, full stop. You know everything, comma, sir, full stop. MAM I know nothing, full stop. I do not even know why in a pack of cards the king of diamonds, comma, the jack of hearts and the jack of spades have one eye each when all the others have two, exclamation mark. YM: I know, comma, sir, full stop. MAM No, comma, I am no magic deer, full stop. But we can come to some terms, full stop. As a matter of fact I need a secretary as much as you need a provider, full stop. Can you handle everything right, question mark.

Mam: That is perfect. You fully understand what I want. Your job is to write down correctly what the playwright is seeing, that is, what I am seeing.

Ym: But that won't solve your problem. Even if I write down all that has happened so far, the last portion will be: MAM gives dictation to YM. There will be nothing to write thereafter. And having written all that, the script will have a running time of not more than ten minutes.

Mam: You are right. What would you suggest then?

Ym: We have to create events. We have to create a story out of the characters who come here.

Mam: But nothing seems to be happening here. That girl over there is here for quite some time, but is sitting quiet. The old man is mad and his ramblings do not make any sense. The clock-face has also gone away.

Ym: Don't you worry, Sir. Things will happen. If nothing happens on its own, I have this too. *(He brings out a pistol from his pocket and gives it to* MAM)

Mam: *(surprised and afraid)* Who are you? Come out with the truth now. Where did you get the pistol from?

Ym: Whatever I had told you is the truth. The absolute truth. I came to you in search of a job. It is up to you to keep me with you or not.

Mam: Out with the truth. Or else I will shoot you dead.

(Excited, MAM *aims the pistol at* YM)

Ym: It's no use. There is no bullet in the pistol.

Mam: *(relieved now)* Then it is all right. *(He puts the pistol in his pocket.)* I have complete trust in you.

Ym: What a strange world! When I told you the truth, you did not believe me, but when I told you a lie, you believed me. At least that made you relaxed. In my relationship with you, I will try to see that you keep relaxed and never get excited.

Mam: But are there bullets in the pistol?

Ym: It depends on you. If you would not get excited if there are bullets in the pistol, then there are bullets. If you do not get relaxed unless there are no bullets in the pistol, there are no bullets.

Mam: But are there bullets in the pistol in fact, or not?

Ym: As I said, it depends on whether you are relaxed or excited. If relaxed, there are bullets; if excited, there are no bullets.

Mam: Then it is all right.

(When they are thus engaged in conversation, a man dressed like a policeman—let's call him POLICE—comes in, unseen by them, and raises his pistol to them. Now they both see him.) Are you excited or relaxed?

Police: How does it matter?

Mam: That will tall me if your pistol has bullets or not.

Police: It is there.

Mam: What is there? Excitement, relaxation or bullet?

Police: The robber is hiding here and I am going to find him out.

Mam: But there does not seem to be any robber here. As you can see, we are just a few people here—we two, the old man over there, and the girl. There is no robber here. Go and look for him elsewhere.

Ym: *(to* MAM) You, Sir, will bungle everything. If the policeman goes away, everything will become quiet again. What will you do with the old man and the girl? *(To* POLICE) Well, Sir, why don't you carry out a search? What exactly has been stolen?

Police: It is not a theft. They want to hijack the plane. There was an anonymous letter. I am sure the ringleader is hiding here.

(CLOCK *comes in, looks at each of them and goes out. No one bothers about him. The clock strikes outside.* OM *wakes up with a start, runs up to* POLICE *and holds him tight. The pistol slips from his fingers.* MAM *picks up the pistol and keeps it in his pocket.)*

Om: What time is it now?

Police: It is fourteen. But where is my pistol? (MAM *is running away.* POLICE *catches him.)* I have got you this time. You are the ringleader. Take out the pistol and the bomb.

Mam: There is no bomb. Only two pistols. *(He aims both pistols)* Why don't you take back your pistol?

(POLICE *is afraid of coming near him to take the pistol.*)

Police: Throw it to me.

Mam: Which one is your pistol?

Om: How many minutes past fourteen is it ?

Police: No minutes, please. Only fourteen. *(To* OM) But why do you want to know about time? Are you interested to know the ETD of the plane? But the plane will not leave until I have done a thorough search of every nook and corner. It will do you no good to know the time. Come out with the truth now. Where is the bomb?

Om: No one seems to be knowing the correct time here. (OM *turns round to go.)*

Police: *(to* MAM) He is trying to run away. Show him the pistol. (MAM *does not bother.* OM *goes back to his seat.)*

Mam: Which one is your pistol? The right one or the left one?

Police: Whose right? Whose left? Yours or mine?

Mam: Mine.

Police: I mean, is it your right which is my left or is it your left which is my right?

Mam: Yours.

Police: I mean...

Mam: Let me change the pistols to avoid all confusion. *(He takes his hands behind and shuffles the pistols.)*

Now tell me which is your pistol? Is it the right one or the left one.

Police: Yes.

Mam: What is that now? Is it yes, the right one, or is it yes, the left one?

Police: Yes and no.

Mam: Cut out the jokes now. You don't seem to be interested in taking back the pistol. That makes me wonder if you are really a policeman!

Police: *(scared now)* Quiet, please. How did you know?

(G-I *comes and asks* POLICE)

G-I: You must be the station-master.

Police: No, please. I am a thief. I mean I am a policeman who catches thieves. But why do you ask?

G-I: I have gone through the timetable twice over, but there is no stoppage of any train here.

Police: In that case, no train will stop here.

Mam: But you were saying that the flight will take off from this airport.

Police: Whether train or plane or station or airport, it won't leave if it is not scheduled in the timetable.

G-I: But I'm sure he mentioned this place. *(Another girl,* G-II, *arrives, dressed exactly like* G-I. *She does not talk to them, but sits at a distance and looks at her watch.* G-I *keeps on talking, though everyone's attention is now on* G-II.) He is very punctual. One day he was thirty seconds late reaching the park. I had given him such a dressing-down that he was never late again. Why did he get late today? *(To herself)* Could it be that I got him wrong? Was it eight in the morning or in the night? Or did I mix up the name of the station? What if he does not come? It will be his tragedy! (G-I *goes back to her place. Now* POLICE *goes to* G-II.)

Police: *(to* G-II) Are you also looking for him?

G-II: It is a long story.

Police: If you don't mind...

G-II: But where do I start from?

Police: From the very beginning. And not so loud, please. Don't you see how everyone is trying to eavesdrop?

(G-II *starts telling something to* POLICE *in whispers.)*

Mam: *(to* YM) Do you see how the policeman is trying to impress the girl ?

Ym: That's good. You'll be able to make use of that.

Mam: But we can't hear what they are saying.

Ym: We can well figure out what is going on.

Mam: What do we do sitting here?

Ym: We may discuss about relativity in the meantime.

Mam: What do you know about it?

Ym: Or else I can tell you a story. It may be of some use to you sometime. It is a story of ancient times. It is from our Indian mythology. Once Vishnu, being pleased with Narada's prayers and penance, granted him a boon.

(At this time, three persons peep in. The old man asks: May I have a bottle of rejuvenation tablets? The old woman asks: Is the Judge in? And the short thin young man, whom we may call Lad, asks: May I come in?)

Mam: Drive them out. Drive them out.

Ym: No, no. They are all the better for us. We have got more characters for our play.

Mam: But I can't handle so many characters. Every playwright has a repertory in his head. For instance, Shakespeare uses a cast of about twenty characters in his plays; Tennessee Williams five or six. Beckett uses only one, or if it is two, one is a reflection of the other. As for myself, I am a playwright who can handle not more than five or six characters. How many do we have now?

Ym: Old man, girl one, policeman, girl two. That makes only four. Which means we can easily accommodate these three.

Mam: What about clock-face?

Ym: In that case you will have to include the two of us also.

Mam: That's right. I had forgotten about us. We are full and cannot take anyone else.

(The three repeat their questions: May I have a bottle of rejuvenation tablets? Is the Judge in? May I come in?)

Ym: Let's then ask them to go away.

(He goes and stands before the three)

Old Man: Have you got a bottle of rejuvenation tablets?

Ym: Out of stock.

Old Woman: Is the Judge in?

Ym: Out of station.

Lad: May I come in?

(YM *comes back. Old man and old woman leave. Lad does not go.)*

Ym: As I was saying, Vishnu was pleased with Narada's prayers and penance and offered him a boon.

Mam: *(not listening to him)* What did they take this for? A chemist's shop or a court? What does the lad want?

(Lad again says: May I come in? YM *goes to him and shouts: Out. Get out. Lad leaves and* YM *comes back to* MAM.)

Ym: To continue my story, Narada said, Please explain to me what is Maya. This is the boon I am asking for. Are you listening to me, Sir?

Mam: Yes. But do you think the place looks like a chemist's shop? Do we look like patients?

Ym: Vishnu said, So be it, and asked Narada to follow him.

Mam: If you had been given a boon, what would you have asked for? Rejuvenation tablets, justice or merely permission to come in?

Ym: I find you are a very fickle and restless person. Do listen to me carefully. Or if your mind is straying, I know how to handle it. Please take the notebook and write down what I say. That way you cannot be unmindful.

(He gives MAM *his notebook and starts talking as if giving a dictation.* MAM *starts writing.)*

Vishnu and Narada kept walking and finally reached a desert. Vishnu became thirsty and asked Narada to go to the village and fetch a glass of water. Narada went to the village and knocked on the door of a house. The door was opened by a very beautiful girl. Seeing this beautiful girl, Narada forgot why he had gone there. The girl's parents welcomed Narada and requested him to stay with them. Narada stayed in their house and in course of time married the girl. He devoted himself to cultivation of the land and became a family man. He had three children now. In the meantime, twelve years passed and there was a devastating flood in the village. Narada wanted to cross the flooded river and go to a safe place. He put the youngest child on his shoulder and, taking his wife and the other two children by the hand, he started crossing the river. The young child fell from his shoulders and, trying to save him, he let go the other children. His wife and the three children were carried by the stream and drowned. Narada himself slipped and fell and became unconscious, floating on the water. When he came to his senses, he found himself on a stone surface. He remembered his wife and children and started crying. Suddenly he heard a familiar voice saying, "Where is my water, my son? I have been waiting for an hour." Narada opened his eyes wide and saw that there was no sign of flood. The desert was shining in bright sunlight. Vishnu said, "Do you now understand what *maya* is?"

Mam: *(closes his notebook)* Yes, I understand. Bul I still do not understand why they had come.

Ym: You may use this story in the mouth of one of the characters.

Mam: Listening to your irrelevant story, we have forgotten our original story line. The policeman is still going on talking to the girl, but we do not know what it is all about.

Ym: Please don't worry. I know what is going on there. Girl Two told the policeman, I loved him very dearly. And we decided to run away, take the train and get off wherever our fancy carried us.

Mam: What did the policeman say?

Ym: Policeman said, Yes, I know that. But you did a mistake by trusting him. That fellow is unfit for you. He will not come.

Mam: What did the girl say?

Ym: Girl Two said, You are lying.

Mam: What did the policeman say?

Ym: Policeman said, All right. Remember my words. I'll take a bet with you. He won't come during the next two hours.

Mam: *(looks at* POLICE *and* G-II) They are silent now.

Ym: I know. We have now to wait for two hours, the time given by the policeman.

Mam: They have been talking for so long. You finished their dialogue in a minute.

Ym: Haven't you heard of relativity? If you are sitting near a beautiful girl, two hours feel like two minutes.

Mam: *(seeing the police come towards them)* Look, the policeman is coming this side. Should we stay or run away?

Ym: Leave everything to me.

(G-I *also comes to them.)*

Police: Didn't I tell you the truth? It did not take even a few minutes to realise the truth.

G-I: I realised that it was an old time-table.

Police: But the basic question is: Does the train stop because it is written down in the time-table, or is it written down in the time-table because the train stops? We must find out that first.

G-II: For me the basic question is whether he will come or not.

Police: That's right. There is a basic question to everything. *(He*

takes out a piece of paper from his pocket.) I found this piece of paper in my pocket the other day. It says only:

Sorry, next year. For me the basic question is: Who wrote this, which is the next year, and what will happen then? *(The old man and the old woman appear and repeat their questions. May I have a bottle of rejuvenation tablets? is the Judge in?* YM *goes up to them and says)*

Ym: *(to aid man)* No, Sir. *(To old woman)* Not in. And if you come across that lad, tell him that the answer is no, a plain and simple no. *(Old man and old woman leave.* G-I *comes in.)*

G-II: *(to policeman)* May I borrow your time-table? *(Police gives the piece of paper to* G-II, *who reads it and passes it on to* G-I *who reads it and returns it to policeman. They go back.)*

Police: Now I know that the two girls are one and the same. One is a mirror-image of the other.

Mam: Who is whose image? Who is the original, who is the image?

Police: Both are images. Or rather, each one is an image of an image.

Mam: Is the man they are looking for also an image?

Ym: That is nice. The play could be called *Two Images in Search of an Image.*

Mam: But I had thought of *A Playwright in Search of Six Characters.*

Ym: *(to* POLICE) What do you suggest?

Police: The basic question is: Would you write a play basing on a title, or would you give the title basing on the play? What is the time now?

Mam: You seem to be interested in time like the old man. He is asking about time since he has no work, but why do you want to know about time?

Police: The basic question is...

Ym: I know what you are going to say. You'll say: The. basic question is, do you need time because you have work or do you need work because you have time?

(The clock strikes outside. CLOCK *comes in.)*

Clock: Who needs time?

Mam: I don't. Do you, secretary? (YM *shakes his head saying no.)* And policeman, Sir, do you need time? *(Police also says no.)* It is the old man who needs time. I find that the older one grows, the more time he needs. And Mr. Clock, Sir, when you come back after meeting the old man, ask me again. I might need some time then.

(CLOCK *goes away from them and stands first near* G-I *and then near* G-II. *They do not look at him.* CLOCK *goes to* OM *and wakes him up.* OM *gets up with a start.)*

Om: Who is that? Who is that?

(CLOCK *bends his head and salutes.)*

So, you are back again.

Clock: You want time?

Om: Where will you get time from? You are a big zero.

Clock: Everything starts from zero.

Om: Then tell me what time it is now.

Clock: I will tell you now.

(The clock strikes outside, with irregular chimes.)

Om: What time is it?

Clock: You disturbed me and I could not count the hours. Perhaps it was ...

Om: I don't want any guesses. I want the absolutely correct time. How many hours, how many minutes, how many seconds, and how many sixtieth part of seconds. Can you tell me?

Clock: You bungled everything.

Om: You are a cheat. A long-winded busybody. Never again come to me.

Clock: You bungled everything.

Om: Go away, I say. Otherwise, I will tie you up.

Clock: Can you catch me ever? Try ...

(CLOCK *starts running and feinting.* OM *runs after him. For some time* CLOCK *stands between* G-I *and* G-II. OM *does not see him and turns back.)*

Clock: *(shouts)* I am here. Catch me.

(OM *runs after him, but he easily evades him and runs out of the stage.* OM *goes back to sleep.)*

Mam: But what is the time?

Ym: *(Takes out the calendar from his pocket)* Thirtieth April will be a Sunday.

Mam: So what?

Ym: You can know everything from this eternal calendar. For instance, you can know that twenty-ninth April will be a Saturday and thirty-first April a Monday.

Mam: But the question is *now*. What hour is it now?

Police: So you want to know the time. All right? Now see... *(He blows on his whistle. Everyone waits as if something is going to happen. Nothing happens for a couple of minutes. Angry,* POLICE *blows on his whistle twice more. Everyone waits, but nothing happens.* POLICE *looks at his whistle angirly.)*

Ym: Everyone has failed. No one knows anything about time. *(To* MAM) Would you please read out that quotation about time?

Mam: *(reads out from his note-book)* The passage of time is merely a feature of our consciousness and has no objective physical significance. Thus past, present and future have the value of mere illusion. Einstein said that.

Ym: Now we understand everything.

Mam: Shall I read some more?

Ym: Please.

Mam: St. Augustine said: There are three times—a present of things past, a present of things present, and a present of things future.

Ym: Wonderful. Everything is crystal clear now. No one can have any doubts about time.

(POLICE *blows his whistle again.* LAD *comes and asks: May I come in?* POLICE *looks at his whistle with great satisfaction.)*

Mam: *(to* YM) Should we call him in ?

Ym: Yes, we should. We are already short of one character.

Mam: Did the old man pop off?

Ym: No. But we know that the two girls are one and the same.

Mam: *(goes to* LAD) Please come in, Sir. Please do.

(POLICE *goes up and looks at LAD's face with great satisfaction.)*

Ym: *(to* LAD) What do you know about all this, Sir?

Lad: *(whispers)* Hickory, Dickory, Dock.

Mam: I can't hear you.

Lad: *(shouts)* Hickory Dickory Dock.

(The old man wakes up with a start. G-I *and* G-II *come and* hold LAD *by his hands. The light fades.)*

G-I & G-II: We've got him. We've got him.

Police: Didn't I tell you he would come within two hours?

G-I: But this one look darker.

G-I: Also shorter.

G-I: His nose is smaller.

G-II: His ears larger.

G-I: Hair too thin.

G-II: Lips too thick.

G-I: Weighs more.

G-II: Sees less.

G-I & G-II: But he will do. *(To* LAD) Let's go.

(The girls were circling LAD *and examining him all this time. Now they hold his hands and pull him.* LAD *looks at them helpless. The light becomes dimmer.)*

G-I: He does not seem to be willing to go. *(To* LAD) What do you want?

Lad: Hickory.

G-II: We won't leave you.

Lad: Dickory.

G-I: Come with us quietly. Or else, we will tie you up.

Lad: Dock.

G-II: No tricks now. The moment the train comes, we take you and go.

(The girls pull him. LAD *sulks and whines.)*

Police: *(to* LAD) Why are you teasing the girls?

Lad: *(mumbles)* Hickory Dickory Dock.

Police: What are you people doing? This fellow is kidnapping the girls and you are keeping quiet. Police, Police! ... *(The girls tug at* LAD *who whines louder. The light becomes dimmer still.)* (*To* LAD) Leave the girls alone. Or else, or else ... (OM *comes and joins them. They are all now standing surrounding the Lad and the girls.*) Leave them, I say. Or else I will shoot you. (MAM *takes out the pistol from his pocket. It is quite dark now. The clock strikes.)* I will count up to three. If you don't leave them alone ... One ... (*He blows the whistle)* Two ... (*He blows again*) Three ... (POLICE *blows a long whistle.* CLOCK *runs into their midst. The pistol goes off in the dark. When the light brightens, they are standing in two rows with their faces towards the back of the stage. In the centre lies* CLOCK, *dead as a doorknob. The stage becomes dark.)*

Act Two

(When lights come, one finds the stage as before. Clockface gets up slowly and takes out the mask from his face. One is surprised to find that it was YM *under the mask!)*

Ym: *(gets up and stands erect)* How did you like my acting?

Mam: Are you really an actor?

Ym: No, I am a critic. But every review that I do is a bit of acting.

Mam: What about being my secretary?

Ym: That was acting too. Everything is acting. That old man is acting as if asleep, but is keeping an eye on everything going on here. The thief is acting the policeman. The girl is doing a double role. A dead man is playing the clock. Do you know what you are acting?

Mam: I am a playwright.

Ym: I know. You are a conventional playwright but trying to act like a modern playwright writing absurd plays.

Mam: Where did I go wrong, Sir?

Ym: You are an Indian playwright?

Mam: Yes, Sir.

Ym: Have you read Kalidasa, Bhavabhuti ?

Mam: No, Sir.

Ym: What you read then?

Mam: Ionesco, Adamov, Genet, Beckett.

Ym: Who is your ideal?

Mam: Vladimir.

Ym: Vladimir who?

Mam: Vladimir and Estrogon. As in: Estrogon—Well, shall we go? Vladimir—Yes, let's go. Within brackets, they do not move.

Ym: All right, all right. What is your new play about?

Mam: It is about time.

Ym: Do you know what the Atharva Veda has to say about time?

Mam: No, but...

Ym: So you know about time which is from the Germanic root *t:* ? Time that goes with tide.

Mam: It was called *tima* in Old English and *timi* in Old Norse.

Ym: What do you know about time?

Om: For most purposes, the world gets its time from the sun, reckoning a day as the average interval of time from noon to noon. This is called "mean solar time". The time indicated by a sundial called "apparent solar time" does not as a rule agree with the "mean solar time", because the actual solar day is constantly changing in length owing to the shifting of the earth's position as it revolves. Mean solar time, when determined by local observation, is obviously the same only for places on the same meridian, because the sun travels 15 degrees of longitude every hour. In order to do away with such possibilities of confusion, the majority of civilised countries have established time zones roughly 15 degrees wide, throughout each of which the same time—known as standard time—is observed, so that the time of each belt will vary by an exact hour from those on either side. These belts are measured east and west from one centred on Greenwich Observatory.

Ym: Is that all?

Mam: No. Let me continue. Now let us follow the "time zone" system round the earth. When it is noon in Greenwich on, say, April 15, it is only 7 a.m. in Washington, USA; and in the time zone in which the Samoan islands lie it is midnight. That is, April 15 has just begun in Samoa. Going east from Greenwich at noon there, it is already 2 p.m. in Leningrad, and 5.30 p.m. in Madras. Shall I go on ?

Ym: No, thank you. So you will write a play about time.

Mam: I have already started writing. Shall I read? Act one.

Within brackets. When lights come, one sees a bare stage with a few stools scattered about. The old man—OM—moves about, sitting for a while on a stool and moving away again, as if unhappy with the seat. He now shuts his eyes and appears to be meditating. A good deal of time passes. The old man is now sleeping. A middleaged man—MAM—comes. He sits next to OM. Checks whether OM is alive or dead. He speaks out to him loudly. Bracket closed. MAM Excuse me, Sir.

(OM *gets up with a start.)*

Om: What time now?

Mam: Twentyfive minutes.

Om: Twentyfive minutes past which hour?

Mam: How can I say? My watch does not have the hour hand.

Om: How do you find out the time then?

Mam: Finding out the minutes only is fine for me. Like for some people knowing the hour is enough. When you ask for time, some would say, twenty five minutes past four. No one says, it is twenty five minutes past four o'clock on the seventeenth day of the month of August in the year nineteen hundred and seventy nine. Certain things are said, the rest are understood. Even if my watch had an hour hand, how would you know if it was the time of the day or the night?

Om: But then what time is it now?

Mam: Twenty five minutes and thirty seconds.

Om: But you said just now...

Mam: Thirty one seconds.

Om: That means...

Mam: Thirty two seconds.

Om: Oh, no, I meant....

Mam: Thirty-three seconds.

Om: I mean to say ...

Mam: Thirty-four seconds.

Om: You can't be ...

Mam: Thirty-four seconds.

Om: How can that be?

Mam: Thirty-four seconds; thirty-four seconds. Because my watch has stopped!

(The clock strikes outside, CLOCK *comes in and moves about.)*

Om: What time is it now?

Mam: Eighteen.

Om: But how many minutes past eighteen?

Mam: I don't know. Please go away.

(OM *goes away. CLOCK follows him and sits near him.)*

Ym: It struck fourteen. Why did you tell him eighteen?

Mam: It does not matter. Fourteen or eighteen, all that the old man wants is a number. Well, what was I saying now? (POLICE, *who was listening to them, comes closer now.)*

Police: It was about the play you have already started writing.

Ym: What happens in the end?

Mam: The first act ends in a murder. In the second half the solution is found. The question is: who killed time?

Police: But the basic question is, where is the murder weapon? (MAM *takes out the pistol and gives it to* YM. YM *examines it.* POLICE *asks for the pistol but when* YM *hands it over to him, takes it not in his hand, but on a handkerchief, and puts the pistol wrapped in the handkerchief in his pocket.)*

So we have the weapon. Now for the dying declaration. The question is, what did the clock say before death?

Mam: I have not heard anything.

Police: That can't be. All of you come here.

*(G-I and G-*II *come nearer.* CLOCK *goes on pacing.)*

What did he say when he fell down after being shot?

G-I: He said, I don't want *time. (Emphasises "time")*

G-II: No. He said, I *don't want* time. *(Emphasises "don't want")*

Police: Who does that point to as the murderer? If he said, I don't want *time,* then the murderer is someone, and if he said, I *don't want* time, then the murderer is someone else.

Mam: But both point to the old man only. It is the old man who

was so concerned with time. The deceased talking about time is pointing his accusing finger at the old man.

Police: So now, we have the murder weapon. We have the dying declaration. We also have the murderer.

Ym: No, sir. Though the evidence leads to the old man, the real murderer is someone else. *(The clock outside strikes.* CLOCK *goes out.)*

Mam: Yes, sir. The murderer is someone else. And that murderer is *(to* YM) you. It is your pistol. It is your fingerprint on the pistol. How can we forget that it was you who had first pulled out the pistol?

Ym: Patience, please. Please have patience. Please think of everything before you judge a person. It was not I only who had a pistol. The policeman also had a pistol. And with what finesse he took my fingerprints on the pistol! When he took the pistol in his handkerchief, I knew who the murderer was. And then, I have my doubts if this fellow is a policeman. First he said something about catching a thief. That was only a ploy to gain entrance. After that he tried to accuse the old man. But then, truth triumphed in the end.

Police: Ladies and gentlemen. May I have your attention, please. I may not be a policeman. I may even be a thief. But I am no murderer. Frankly, I have been suspicious of the middle-aged man from the start. This was the man who was waxing eloquent about time. And the strongest evidence against him is that he had the murder weapon on him. The murder was committed, not with the pistol which I have, but with the one in this gentleman's pocket. *(To* MAM) Out with the pistol, now!

Mam: No, No...

G-1: We knew that he was the murderer.

G-II: He who can split a character in two is capable of anything.

Ym: What does that mean?

G-1: It is against the tradition of theatre to show two similar characters in a play. In this play a character has been split into two and given to us. Not just that. We have been given similar dress, dialogue and character. This confuses the audience. Even the policeman was confused.

G-II: Secondly, we have hardly any role in the play. There has to be a balance between male and female characters in a play. This play does not have it. Most of the time we have just to hang around doing nothing. For instance, I have already read the timetable twice, having nothing else to do.

G-I: Thirdly, we do not have much of movement on the stage. We are made to wait for someone, who does not turn up. And so we had in the end to catch hold of the funny fellow.

G-II: Fourthly... *(She mimes making a speech.)*

G-I: Fifthly... *(Mimes talking in a more agitated manner.)*

G-II: Sixthly... *(Mimes a still more excited speech.)*

Mam: Patience, my dear ladies and gentlemen, have patience. I have a lot to say about the accusations made against me, but I choose to keep quiet. I am indeed unfortunate. I am unfortunate to have been born in a country where the readers are blind, the audience is illiterate, and the critics are idiots. Rather than suffer such foolishness, I consider it more respectable to confess to the murder. You will be happy to know, ladies and gentlemen, that after due deliberation, I have decided, to announce that I committed the murder.

Ym: That is impossible. I must take responsibility for my action. The murder is mine and mine only. I have committed it singlehanded. Or to put it differently, I have committed suicide without anyone's aid or abetment. Milord and gentlemen of the jury, you cannot hang a person for someone else's crime. It is my pistol, it is my fingerprint and, what is more, it is my corpse. It is only I who is responsible for the crime, only I. I am prepared for the severest sentence.

Police: May I say something in this connection, milord?

Ym: If you are particular about the dying declaration or suicide note, I am prepared even now to record a statement that I committed the crime while in complete possession of my wits.

Police: Milord, I am an impostor and a liar. But I want to tell you the truth before I breathe my last. Milord, I am not a policeman. As a matter of fact, no one of our family has been in the police for seven

generations. I am a great sinner. But I do not want anyone to be punished for my crime. Please punish me on my statement. Let truth triumph.

(The clock strikes. CLOCK *comes in, goes around, and then goes out.* YM *comes to them.)*

Om: What time is it now?

(No one listens to OM. *They continue as before.)*

G-I: This only shows how two lies make one truth. Though you have all tried to arrive at a conclusion with your half-baked arguments, you have all missed a basic premise. What is it that a murder presupposes? It presupposes a murderer. It presupposes a man to be murdered. It also presupposes a murder weapon. But more than these, a murder presupposes another important thing.

G-II: And that is the motive. You can have a murder without a murderer. You can have a murder without having to kill a man. But the thing without which no murder is possible is motive.

G-I: And therefore we have to ask ....

Om: What time is it now?

G-I: What is it that motivated the murder? Who is it that gains by the murder? Once that question is answered, catching the murderer is but child's play.

Om: But we must know the correct time too.

G-II: Motives for a murder can be of three types: for money, for woman or for fame. There are instances of murder for one or more of these reasons. There could be a murder for money and woman, or for woman and fame, or for money and fame.

G-I: The murder under our consideration is one which combines all three elements. Or to put it differently, it is a case where two and two make four.

Om: But then what can you do if you don't know what time it is?

Mam: It is now evident that the real murderers are these two girls. That is the final truth.

(Since no one listens to OM, *he goes away.)*

G-II: It is as true as the sun rising in the east. Or Jack and Jill going up the hill.

G-I: Or happy days are here again.

Mam: And they must be tried and suitably punished. I am willing to be the prosecutor and produce all the evidence.

Ym: I am willing to be the judge. You will recall that the old woman was asking for the judge, that is me.

Police: For a fair trial, I would like to be the defense counsel. *(They rearrange the seats as in a courtroom.)*

Ym: Silence, silence! The court is now in session. Let the prosecution present its case.

Mam: May it please your honour. To present this serious matter, I must begin from the very beginning. You may ask, which is the beginning? According to the Book of Genesis in the Bible, God made the earth, the heavens and the planets and then formed man of the dust of the ground and placed him in the Garden of Eden. Watered by a river and abounding in trees and fruit and food, Eden was a garden of delight. Animals and birds, formed out of the ground, were added, were named by Adam, the man God had created, and lived peaceably in the Garden. Then, as a companion for Adam, woman was made from a rib taken from his side when he was in a deep sleep, and the two lived together in a state of perfect happiness and innocence.

Police: Objection, milord. This is a denigration of the character of woman.

Ym: There is no such thing as character of woman. Objection overruled. You may proceed, Mr. Prosecutor.

Mam: In the garden stood the Tree of Knowledge whose fruit was forbidden to Adam and Eve. This fruit the woman Eve was tempted to eat by the serpent, more cunning than any beast of the field, and Adam also fell into temptation and ate the fruit. Then the eyes of both were opened; they lost their innocence and gained knowledge of good and evil. As a punishment for sin, or disobedience to God ...

Police: Objection...

Yam: Overruled. Please continue.

Mam: They were turned out of Eden; the serpent was cursed, the woman condemned to the pains of childbirth.

Police: Ob—

Om: Over—

Mam: And made subject to man and the man compelled to toil for his food from that time onwards. *(The clock strikes.* OM *wakes up with a start and comes to them.)*

Om: What time is it now?

(No one listens to him. He tries to listen to them for some time but gets bored and goes back to his seat. MAM *continues his speech. However, one sees only his mouth moving without any voice coming out. He continues his mime when the clock strikes outside.)*

Police: Objection, milord.

Ym: Objection overruled. *(To* MAM) Please continue.

(MAM *continues his mime of making a strong speech. Agitated,* POLICE *mimes a protest. The girls also join the act and, equally agitated, mime a strong statement. It appears as if there is a serious difference of opinion.)*

Ym: Order. Order.

Police: Milord, I have no faith in this court.

Ym: If doubts are cast on the fairness of the trial and the impartiality of the court, I would not like to continue as the judge.

Police: In that case I don't mind being the judge and conducting the trial.

Mam: But how can a party to the case sit in judgment? Against my wishes, and only in the interest of a fair trial, I am willing to take up the responsibility.

Ym: You too have been a party. What fairness can be expected from you? How can the prosecutor be the judge?

Police: In that case the choice narrows down to the girls.

(The girls go to the Judge's seat. They rearrange the seats.)

G-I & G-II: Order. Order.

(LAD *enters. He behaves as if he is the lord and master of the whole show.)*

Lad: Please hold on for a minute. I think the microphones are not working. *(Looks at the cabin)* Tone up the sound a little. Testing. Testing. One two three four five. *(His voice comes out very loud on the speaker)* A little lower, please, Five four three two one. O. K. Now for the lights. Make it a little brighter. *(It becomes brighter)* Not so much. Dim it a bit. That's better. Now get along with the dialogue.

(LAD *goes out.)*

G-I & G-II: Order. Order.

Mam: Milord. Listening to the evidence of the prosecution witnesses and the presentation of the public prosecutor, anyone will think that there is no criminal more wicked and vile than the accused. But, milord, this is a case which stands out as an example of twisting the truth beyond recognition through falsehood. I will produce one single proof of this, which will make the case take a complete turn. That proof lies in the public prosecutor's pocket. Public prosecutor, sir, will you please come to the dock?

Police: I swear that I will tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

Mam: What are you really?

Police: To be truthful, I am a liar.

Mam: If you are a liar, then your statement that you are a liar is a lie. That makes you a truthful person. If you are a truthful person, then your statement that you are a liar is true. That makes you a liar. Which is the truth? The lie is the truth or the truth is the truth?

Police: Truth is lie.

Mam: If truth is lie, then what is lie? Contrarily, if lie is truth, then what is truth?

Police: Lie is truth.

G-I & G-II: Order. Order.

Mam: Let me now come to the material object. (*To* POLICE) What have got in your pocket? (POLICE *takes out the whistle and blows on it.*) What else have you got?

Police: Nothing else.

Mam: *(whispers)* That piece of paper.

Police: *(takes out the piece of paper)* Yes, sir, this piece of paper.

Mam: Please read out what is written.

Police: (*Reads)* Sorry, next year.

(Gives the piece of paper to MAM)

Mam: *(tries to decipher it)* Milord, please note bow witness is trying to mislead the court. The paper says, not "Sorry, next year", but "Sonny, nasty car". Let this he taken into the court's records. What other spoof is necessary?

(LAD *enters)*

Mam: What happened now? My dialogue is all right. Except that I said spoof instead of proof. Everything else was all right.

Lad: No, after the first court scene, everything seems confused. And there is a lot of repetition. We have to make changes. (LAD *sits down. Others sit surrounding him.* OM *does not move and keeps sleeping.* POLICE *looks inside and calls Clock who comes and joins them.*)

Lad: Is everybody there?

Mam: Except the old man.

(The clock strikes.)

Lad: Doesn't matter. He has nothing to do except enquire about the time. How long did it take to do the First Act?

Police: The old man was keeping time. About forty minutes.

Lad: How many minutes of the Second Act have we done by now?

Police: About half an hour.

Lad: Which means we need another ten-fifteen minutes of play. We have to decide about the end,

G-I: That's why I had suggested doing *The Twins.*

Lad: Thank heavens, no. Let's be done with this play first. Let me have the script. (MAM *passes on his notebook to him.)* How far have we gone?

(MAM *points out the page.)*

Order. Order. Then there are ten pages of court scene. It will get boring. We must have a strong climactic ending as in the First Act.

(The lights dim.)

What follows the court scene?

(MAM *shows him the page. Lad looks closely as it is difficult to read in the dim light.)*

This is the end of Act One.

What about the finale of the play?

Mam: Both end in a similar manner.

Lad: How can that be?

G-II: That's why I had suggested doing *The Twins.*

Lad: We have no time now. Let's cut out ten minutes from the court scene and do the last portion. Get back to your respective places.

(They line up as in the end of Act One. The girls hold LAD's *hands and pull him.* LAD *sulks and whines.)*

Police: (*to* LAD) Why are you teasing the girls?

Lad: *(mumbles)* Hickory Dickory Dock.

Police: What are you people doing? This fellow is kidnapping the girls and you are keeping quiet? Police, Police ...

(The girls tug at LAD *who whines louder. The light become dimmer still.)*

(*to* LAD) Leave the girls alone. Or else, or else ...

(OM *comes and joins them. They are all now standing, surrounding the lad and the girls.)* Leave them, I say. Or else I will shoot you.

(MAM *takes out the pistol from his pocket. It is quite dark now. The clock strikes.)* I will count up to three. If you don't leave them alone.... One *(he blows the whistle)* ... Two ... *(he blows again)* Three ...

(POLICE *blows a long whistle.* CLOCK *runs into their midst. The pistol goes off in the dark. When the light brightens, they are standing in two rows with their faces towards the back of the stage. In the centre lies* CLOCK, *dead as a doorknob. Everyone goes inside. The clock strikes outside and becomes quiet. Clock-face gets up and takes out the mask from his face. One is surprised to find that it is the old man.* OM *laughs aloud looking at the mask. The stage becomes dark.)*

Translated by the Author

Director's Note

Tariq Daad

Those days I was rehearsing Rabin Das's play *Janmajeya ka Naagyagya* in Bharat Bhawan's Rangmandal, when I took out a book from the library to read. This book was Jagannath Prasad Das's *Absurd Play.* Many questions and queries began to raise their heads in my mind after reading the play. I have always been in favour of change in theatre, though it is a different matter that there was never an opposition to traditional theatre. But I felt that with the passage of time theatre should also change.

I found immense and immeasurable possibility in bringing about a new thinking with the discovery of the *Absurd Play.* Till 1993 I was only involved with acting and this play provided me a selfish opportunity to associate myself with direction as an actor. I gave copies of the play to two established directors of the city. I also offered them to underwrite the expenses of hiring the theatre, but after reading, both the directors refused to do this play saying that the audiences would not like it since it was completely absurd.

I did not feel bad, but I felt that the thought and the capability of these two senior directors was limited. By 2005, I lost count of the number of times I read *Absurd Play* and engrained the thought firmly in my mind that I will begin my innings as a theatre director with this play!... And that day also came when I took the onus of staging this play with my own team. I read the play with the team for one whole week. We had a great deal of discussions with the artists and a lot of reasonings and deliberations. In the meantime I got a feeling that the actors had begun to enjoy reading the play and it would be a good show

when staged. I just told my fellow artists that theatre today is following a set pattern and if we have to do something different we have to be courageous about it.

Jagannath Prasad Das's absurd is not the absurd of Brecht, Ibsen or Ionesco. It was an absurd written in pure Indian ethos that is not restricted by place, time or language. The play was independent of the storyline. Some characters talk about the past, present and future on the stage. It appears that they are talking of the past in the mirror of the future while searching for their present. Jagannath Prasad Das has taken the help of three generations to show this in the play.

The beauty of any good creation is that its readers or viewers find space for themselves within it and seek out the relevance based on their own particular experiences. The continuous reversal of the story and its unexpected progression keep the audiences bound. During the staging of the play, a lot of times the audiences involuntarily exclaimed surprise, *'Arre!'* I noticed this very minutely and decided to call this absurd play *'Arre!'*. I did not give this title on my own, else it would have been construed as the director's high-handedness. In fact, I had called up the playwright and discussed this with him at the first instance itself.

While directing the play I had used set, music and dress and adornment to bring forth the meaninglessness. Instead of following the playwright's suggestion about the dresses for the characters, we gave all the characters black T-shirts, black capri's and black shoes. Instead of using melodious music we used effects. The only instruction the actors had was that even though the audiences of our city may not be ready for absurd plays, but what we show on the stage should appeal to the eyes and what we say should sound nice to their ears.

The distinguishing feature of the play is that it has touched every subject. For example—science, mathematics, English literature, mythology; and at the centre of all this is time itself. This play gives complete freedom to a director and the actors to experiment and improvise. Apart from time, everything else is disorganised in this play. The dialogues between characters, sequence of events, their activities

and occupation everything bring out the absurd very strongly. This play also shows a deep understanding of theatre as such.

I have had many successful staging of *'Arre!'* Judging by the responses from the audiences and theatre critics I am now convinced that we did a good job of it. I would like to thank Jagannath Prasad Das for creating a different audience who enjoy watching absurd plays after seeing his play.

SUNDARDAS

Translated by
Paul St-Pierre, Leelawati Mohapatra,
K.K. Mohapatra

Picture overleaf

JNU artists
in *Sundardas* (English)
New Delhi, 2008

Sundardas

Introduction

Paul St-Pierre

Sundardas recounts the activities of the first Christian missionaries in Odisha between 1826 and 1832, their meager successes, their discouragement and defeats. But the play is more than a simple retelling of the historical facts; rather, it gives reality to the underlying motivations of the individual actors, as well as to the conflicting worldviews in this meeting of Christianity and Hinduism on the Indian subcontinent, in a context of empire, subjugation and colonization.

But the real question dealt with in the play is a more philosophical one, that is, the nature of the relationship between belief and the (religious) institutions whose role ostensibly is to further and protect it. Through the focus on Sundardas, the sage, this question is played out, as he attempts to place himself outside and beyond all institutions but at the same time is constantly confronted with the limits they impose. Sundardas is a fundamentally iconoclastic figure, but one who, nevertheless, finds himself ensnared by the beliefs and expectations of others, those of his followers on the one hand and of the missionaries on the other. The former believe him to be a worker of miracles; they attach themselves to him and make him their guru. His relation to the missionaries is scarcely different, as they mistake his iconoclasm for a desire to convert and his interest in Christian texts for burgeoning belief. Their error arises out of their adherence to religion in its institutionalized form; for them, recognition of the truth contained within a particular text leads of necessity to the

renunciation of former beliefs, now deemed false, and conversion to the new truth. But these expectations are based on a misunderstanding, for Sundardas, while rejecting rituals, caste, and other attributes of Hinduism, maintains steadfastly that he nevertheless is, and will remain, a Hindu. Sundardas feels no need to turn from Hinduism to Christianity; his quest for truth locates him outside the institutions of either.

Sundardas underscores various paradoxes running through the lives of the different characters, most notably the conflicting values of the secular and the religious, syncretism vs. separation. Such a conflict is found at the very heart of the colonial project. Thus despite their both being instruments of empire, the missionaries and the East India Company are constantly at loggerheads; the justice dispensed by the employees of the Company serving to marginalize all forms of religion. The missionaries, too, are caught up in this conflict, as they reproduce the very hierarchies they wish to subvert. Although they may preach to lower-caste villagers, the missionaries pay them little heed and focus their attention on the conversion of Brahmins. Nor is Sundardas himself untouched by the power of the constraints he is putting into question. Thus, while claiming to espouse the principle of equality between the sexes, he accords greater freedom of thought, of choice and of action to men.

The play illustrates the problematic nature of conversion, insofar as it implies the rejection of one's past and the adoption of a new identity. And here the figure of Balabhadra and his changing names—Balia in his village, Meria to the Kondhs, Balabhadra in Sundardas's ashram, and finally David in the mission—is significant. He can be at home nowhere, and is constantly on the verge of running away. The fundamental theme of the play—that truth cannot come through the denial of one's identity, but also that identity must not blind one to truth—is crystallized in the central figure of Sundardas, as he attempts to negotiate the different relationships and social structures which envelop him. In the end his only recourse is to sink into a form of solipsistic madness.

Sundardas

Cast: Sundardas, William Bampton, Charles Lacey, Amos Sutton, Gangadhar Sarangi, Ramachandra Jachak, Marua—Mary, Balabhadra—David and others

Act One

The ashram of SUNDARDAS, *a sadhu. A raised mud platform around a shady tree where people like to congregate. Morning.* SUNDARDAS's *disciples,* GANGADHAR SARANGI, RAMACHANDRA JACHAK *and his wife* LAXMI, KRUPASINDHU *SAHU's wife* DEVIKA *and some other women:* KAMALI, *her mother* DAANI *and* MARUA. *Also two Brahmins from a nearby village, and* BALABHADRA, *who narrowly escaped being made a meria (human sacrifice) by the hill people. All are waiting for* SUNDARDAS *to come out of his hut.* GANGADHAR *is busy writing something on a palm-leaf with a stylus, and* BALABHADRA *is trying to carry on a conversation with him.*

Scene I

Gangadhar: Be quiet, will you, Balabhadra, my boy? Don't talk to me till I've finished writing. After that I'll be happy to listen to you for as long as you wish.

Balabhadra: Carry on with your writing. I'd better be off.

Gangadhar: *(Closes the palm-leaf scroll.)* Off where—back to the hills? Are you hoping to get caught by the tribesmen again and be sacrificed?

Balabhadra: That wouldn't be so bad. Right up to the end you live a life of luxury. Nothing's denied you—delicacies of every kind, freedom to do whatever you want. You can walk into anyone's house, no doors are closed to you. Bur here, all the time it's do this, do that! From morning to night! So many rules: Bathe twice a day, don't eat

fish or meat, don't chew tobacco, don't smoke. A thousand dos and don'ts.

Gangadhar: Listen Balabhadra, this is an ashram and not some godforsaken hell-hole in the remote hills.

Brahmin I, *one of the two Brahmins who have been listening to the conversation, inches closer.*

Brahmin I: Just what sort of an ashram is this? There aren't any. idols; there's no worship, no priests!

Gangadhar: Not a typical one, certainly. The caste system isn't enforced. Baba says there are no castes, that all men are equal. Here you'll find Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras mingling freely and praying together.

Brahmin I: Go ahead and pray. By all means, pray. But where's the temple?

Gangadhar: Baba says there's no need for temples or idols. Nor for fasts or vigils, rituals or pilgrimages. Holy ashes, marks on the forehead, sandalwood paste, the sacred thread and the water jug are only for show. True worship needs no pilgrimages, no cows, no Brahmins, no consecrated food, no idols, no images, whether made of stone or wood.

Brahmin II: What then does this Baba of yours preach?

Gangadhar: That people should not tell lies, or discriminate on the basis of caste; that they should not take any life, whether human or animal; that they should not cut down trees or destroy forests, steal or commit adultery; that they should not give in to anger, jealousy or hatred.

Brahmin I: And you practise this?

Gangadhar: Yes, this is what we try to practise. We take a morning bath. We don't eat fish or meat, chew tobacco or smoke. We don't tell lies or speak falsehoods. We don't steal, don't look upon women with lust, don't indulge in idol worship. We've uprooted all the basil plants in the courtyard and thrown them away. We don't go on pilgrimages. Fasts and vigils are things of the past. As are consecrated food, the company of the devil, Brahmins and priests.

Brahmin II: So this is what that Baba of yours has told you to do? Is this what your religion is about?

Gangadhar: Baba says that God is everywhere; that we should not answer hate with hate or hit back; that it's wrong to cheat anyone; that we should love our enemies as much as our friends, and love our wife and children as much as we love ourself; that it is important to respect our parents and elders, and not to bear false witness; that we should have equal respect for all human beings, no matter what caste, and give alms to the poor. These are the articles of our faith and we try to practise them.

Brahmin I: What rubbish! Show me where in the scriptures all these things are mentioned.

Gangadhar: What do you know about the scriptures? Come and listen to Baba speak if you want to learn about the scriptures.

Brahmin II: Listen here, we're Brahmins of the purest Kanyakubja stock; we arrived here at the time of King Janmejaya's great snake-sacrifice! We don't need riff-raff like you to lecture us about the scriptures. We know what abominable practices are being practised in this ashram. We know that you don't pay any heed to the sacred caste system, that you've been reading books printed on paper, that you're dabbling in Christian scriptures. You are the enemies of Hinduism. You'll be the ruin of our ancient religion. You've drawn not only men but women too to your vile ways.

Marua *moves closer to* Brahmin II.

Marua: Repeat what you just said, thread-wearer.

Brahmin II: Keep away, woman. Don't you dare to come nearer. What are you up to—trying to pollute me this morning?

Marua: Yes, trying to pollute you. How come you forget about it at night? Come morning caste seems to be uppermost in your mind once again. *(Turns to* KAMALI.) Kamali, isn't this the same Brahmin who runs after you too? No wonder these people can't stand Baba when he preaches equality between men and women.

Brahmin I: Woman, you've already lost your caste, so stop going on about it, will you?

Marua: So according to you Brahmins, as a woman I'm untouchable, is that right? I don't belong anywhere, is that what you think?

Brahmin II: You know very well why you were thrown out of your caste.

Marua: Just because I agreed to do the housework for a Firinghee? Why don't you treat all the Brahmins and Kshatriyas who've taken up work in Firinghee households as cooks, gardeners arid torchbearers the same? Why don't you treat them all as outcastes? Just because I'm a poor woman with no one to defend me you're picking on me. Do you have so little shame that you even boast about it? But what more harm can you cause me? I'm better off now. My new home is better than those in the village.

Brahmin I: Better off? Why not! You've taken whatever tainted money from the Company came your way.

Gangadhar: Brother, it's not for you to lecture us. Don't you know that your great Lord Jagannath Temple at Puri is being run with the tainted money of the Company?

Marua: And don't forget who went to welcome the Company when it invaded Orissa! Who other than the good Brahmin priests and attendants from the holy temple?

Brahmin II: This woman has gone mad. That's what happens if you give women a little freedom.

Marua: Women, women! Stop complaining about them, will you? Hey Laxmi, Devika, Daani, what are you waiting for? Come, give me a hand, help me throttle this lousy Brahmin. Kamali, come here, woman.

Kamali *moves closer to* Brahmin II.

Brahmin II: *(Backs away.)* All right, all right. Let's have it out with your Sundara Baba once and for all; we've had enough. How long can we shut our eyes to the abominations going on here? Just exactly what does go on here day and night? Why are all these women hanging around?

Kamali: But no problem that the men are, huh? Women should

stay at home, is that right? Women, stay at home, cook, look after the babies, take care of the lord and master, keep the household running! Eat only crumbs and leftovers, swallow insults cheerfully, accept the slaps, kicks and blows gracefully; hide indoors, don't ever stay outside for a moment. *(Points to the Brahmins.)* Look how angry they're getting just because Sundara Baba treats men and women equal! That's what makes them see red, isn't it, Laxmi?

Laxmi: What more is there to say? Sundara Baba is like God to us. *(She crosses over to her husband,* RAMACHANDRA.) Could I have married this man without Baba's blessings? When my father fixed my marriage with somebody else for five *bharans* of paddy and fifty rupees I refused to be sold like cattle. (RAMACHANDRA *puts his arm around her protectively.)* It was Baba who saved me.

Devika: Remember how I kept losing one child after another no sooner than they were born? The Brahmins hit upon the silly idea of taking me and my husband through the wedding rituals again, but that didn't help. It was only after we took refuge here in Baba's ashram that the problem ended. Our last three children have survived.

Marua: Say what you will, but the Firinghees show respect to women. And it's the same way in Baba's ashram. Baba makes no difference between men and women.

Brahmin I: I'm waiting for your Baba to come out of his hut. I can't wait to give him a piece of my mind.

Balabhadra *goes inside and comes out carrying a bundle. Everyone falls silent. He walks up to* Gangadhar.

Balabhadra: I'm off. Tell Baba I couldn't stand this place any longer.

Gangadhar: Boy, nobody invited you here in the first place. You came of your own accord, after narrowly escaping being sacrificed by the Kondhs. Nobody's forcing you to stay; you're free to leave.

Marua: But where are you going to go? Six months in the ashram and you've completely forgotten your past. Some people have short memories! How can you say you were better off with the Kondhs?

Didn't you realize they were fattening you up so that there would be enough flesh for everyone when you were sacrificed? You'd have been buried in their turmeric fields. Go, go back to the Kondhs. Go and eat to your fill and get fat and be sacrificed.

Balabhadra *storms out, but returns immediately in great agitation.*

Balabhadra: A white man's headed this way.

Marua: Scared out of your wits, boy? Let the Firinghee come, he's not going to gobble you up.

Enter old padre Bampton, *dressed like a native in dhoti and vest. He is barefooted.*

Bampton: *(To himself)* Where's my horse? Where's it gone? *(He looks around. The sight of a congregation gladdens his heart. He begins to preach with a song.)*

Who else other than
Our Lord Jesus Christ
Can save us
From this world of sin?
It's only He
The son of God
The only saviour!
He who prays to Him
Is redeemed.

My dear brothers and sisters! Have you any idea what brings me here?

Marua: Your horse! *(Mimicks him.)* Where's my horse, where's it gone?

Bampton: So what if my horse isn't here? You good people are!

Marua: You want to ride us or what?

Bampton: I'll show you the path to redemption. How to escape hell! Hell is all fire, brimstone and the stench of sulphur. The Holy Bible says all sinners are damned and human beings are sinful by nature. But there's still hope. Let me tell you about it. There's only one God and He loves us all.

Marua: Loves only you Christians.

Bampton: He loves Hindus too. God has a Son and His name is Jesus Christ. Jesu Krista, you may call Him. Jesu Krista was originally with God the Father. But God the Father was so concerned about this sinful world of ours that He sacrificed His son. He who puts his faith in Him will not only be saved but will enjoy eternal life. Jesu Krista sacrificed His own life for our sins. If we put our trust in Him, His blood will save us from damnation. This is the secret of salvation. There is no other path to redemption. He's the only redeemer, there is no other. Amen. Bring my horse.

Bampton *takes out the watch tucked in at his waist and, singing 'Who else can save', hurries out as if he has just remembered that he should be somewhere else. A moment later he returns, takes a good look at the gathering and says to himself, 'No, my horse isn't here,' and exits.*

Marua: Of course your horse isn't here. There're only human beings here.

Ramachandra: Who was that clown, Marua? Why's a Firinghee dressed so strangely?

Marua: Surely you don't expect me to know all the Firinghees! That man spoke like a padre but wasn't dressed like one. He could be a padre gone mad. Whites too have their fair share of madmen. *(Mimicks.)* Bring my horse. Oh my!

Balabhadra: The fellow's nowhere to be seen.

Gangadhar: Be off then, if you must.

Balabhadra: I'd like to stay, but I feel very homesick.

Gangadhar: Go home then.

Balabhadra: On second thought, I won't go home. If my people could sell me to Death for a few rupees, why should I go back? I'll go somewhere else. Goodbye, Goodbye to you all. This time I'm really off.

Marua: Goodbye, Moonface. Don't let the sight of a Firinghee scare you into scampering back.

Balabhadra *leaves in a huff. The very next moment, he's back, shaking with fear. He has lost his bundle somewhere. He runs to* Ramachandra *and clings to him.*

Ramachandra: What's the matter now?

Balabhadra: They're here, they're here! They're going to catch me again.

Ramachandra: Who?

Balabhadra: The Kondhs, the hill people.

Enter Ratana Pana *and* Buda Munda. Balabhadra *tries to hide.*

Buda Munda: He made a fool of Buda Munda and escaped. The moment we were a little tipsy he slipped the chains off his hands and legs and ran away. But look, Ratana Pana, what did I tell you? Didn't I tell you I'd find him even if I had to go to the end of the earth?

Ratana Pana: See to it he doesn't give us the slip a second time.

Buda Munda: This time I'll put the axe to his neck myself.

They move closer to catch hold of Balabhadra.

Gangadhar: Stop it! This is an ashram, for heaven's sake, not some godforsaken hole in the hills. None of your antics here!

Buda Munda: Hand us over our meria and we'll be gone.

Gangadhar *looks at* Marua *playfully as if wondering if it wouldn't be a good idea to hand over* Balabhadra *to the tribesmen.* Marua *nods in assent.* Balabhadra *joins his palms in supplication, pulls his own ears, indicating he'll never again talk of leaving the ashram.*

Gangadhar: Look, these aren't the dark hills you people come from. Go away without causing trouble, or else we'll get the police to handcuff you and haul you off to jail.

The tribesmen pay no heed and chase Balabhadra, *who ducks behind* Brahmin I *and pushes* Brahmin II *towards* Buda Munda. *In his confusion,* Buda Munda *grabs* Brahmin II, *but releases him immediately after realising his mistake.*

Brahmin II: *(Begins to howl.)* I've been sullied! I've been polluted! I've lost my caste!

The commotion takes some time to subside. Sundardas *is seen standing on the platform. His head is shaved; he's old but full of energy. His face is creased in a smile.*

Sundardas: There are a lot of visitors today. *(Looks around.)* Gangadhar, Ramachandra, Laxmi, Devika, Kamali, Daani, Marua, Balabhadra. Who're the new faces, Gangadhar?

Gangadhar: *(Points out.)* These two Brahmins are from Chowdwar. They've come to engage you in a debate on the scriptures. (Brahmin I *and* Brahmin II *seem distinctly uncomfortable.)* And these two are from the hills.

Sundardas: Very well. But why was there such a commotion a few moments ago?

Gangadhar: The hill people want to take Balabhadra back with them.

Sundardas: Very well.

Balabhadra: Very well? Baba, they want to sacrifice me to their god.

Sundardas: A human sacrifice? What do the scriptures have to say about that?

Gangadhar: *(Looks at the Brahmins, who hang their heads.)* Satpath Brahman has references to animal sacrifice. But all it discusses is the distribution of the sacrificial meat.

Sundardas: And on the subject of human sacrifice?

Gangadhar: The Yajur Veda mentions human sacrifice. The relevant mantras are to be found in the Taittiriya Samhita. The ones indulging in it were the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas who wished to rise to greater heights.

Sundardas: Is that what these men from the hills want—to rise to the top? *(Looks at* Ratana Pana *and* Buda Munda.) What do they want?

Gangadhar: They want to propitiate Mother Earth with a human sacrifice.

Buda Munda: Enough discussion. Hand the boy over and then we'll leave. We paid good money for him.

Sundardas: You bought a human being? What do the scriptures say about that, Gangadhar?

Gangadhar: Aitareya Brahman has it that King Harischandra had promised to sacrifice his own son Rohit to Varun, the watergod. Rohit went around looking for someone to take his place and finally found a Brahmin named Ajigarta, who was willing to sell his second son Sunahsepa. Rohit bought him with a hundred cows.

Sundardas: How awful! How unjust! Was Sunahsepa sacrificed?

Gangadhar: No. The priests refused to tie him to the sacrificial stake.

Sundardas: What happened then?

Gangadhar: For another hundred cows Ajigarta himself tied his son to the stake. But the priests refused to put the knife to the boy's throat. The father was willing to do it himself for another hundred cows.

Sundardas: So in the end it was the father who killed his own son?

Gangadhar: Mercifully, no. Sunahsepa prayed to the Gods.... Verse after verse, the cords that bound him came undone. He was freed.

Sundardas: And father and son were reunited?

Gangadhar: The boy refused to go back to his father. He said any father willing to kill his own son for three hundred cows did not deserve to have one.

Sundardas: Greed and human sacrifice are equally abominable. *(Looks at* Buda Munda *and* Ratana Pana.) Could you understand, even a little?

Ratana Pana: We don't have to. We paid twenty-five rupees to the father of this boy and saved him to be sacrificed. From time immemorial we have been offering human sacrifices to Mother Earth. If they stop, our god will become annoyed and our fields will turn barren. We've got to take back the meria.

Sundardas: Anything in the scriptures in their favour, Gangadhar?

Gangadhar: Kautilya talks of the practice of buying and selling bipeds. Any deceitful transaction had a penalty of twelve *pons.* If somebody lost a slave, he had to pay five *pons* to get him back. If somebody forcibly captured a temple slave he deserved the severest punishment. But there's no reference to human beings bought to be sacrificed who run away.

Sundardas: What does the Book have to say about it?

Gangadhar: In the Old Testament it just says: And he that stealth a man, and selleth him, or if he be found in his hand, he shall surely be put to death.

Sundardas: *(Looks solemnly at* Buda Munda *and* Ratana Pana) Capital punishment!

Buda Munda: Capital punishment or whatever, but we refuse to budge without the boy. Without a sacrifice our lands will remain barren and there'll be a famine. You want us to die of starvation?

Brahmin I: Not only you, but everyone else will die. The Kaliyug isn't far off, considering how low we seem to have plunged.

Sundardas: The Kaliyug? What will happen in the Kaliyug?

Brahmin II: There will be droughts, famines, natural calamities. There's a long chapter about it in the Bhagavat. (He and Brahmin I *start in a singsong voice, each quoting one line.)* The rich will rule the earth.

Women will choose their partners.
Upstarts, proud wretches will be in power.
Virtuous men will be ignored.
Women will consort with their own kind
and men with men.
Whores will be more sought after than good women.
People will forsake their caste.
There will be free mingling of the castes
and ignoble paths will seem attractive.
Anarchy will rule.
The King of Gods will give no rains
and famines will visit the land.

Sundardas: Did you hear that, children? There're famines in the offing.

Brahmin I: That's not all. *(Sings.)*

Righteousness of every kind shall vanish.
The tribe of criminals shall increase.
Rulers will turn robbers
and the ruled will revel

in thieving, lying, quarrelling and back-stabbing.
Even cows will become worse than goats
and eat whatever they never should
and their milk will turn into poison.
There will be no crops, nor anything else.
Pitiful rains and no cultivation.
Homes will be deserted
and men will take to begging
even as they toil like donkeys.
And like fish to water, women
will take to adultery.

Ratana Pana: Save your scriptures for later, and settle our problem first. We're in a hurry to get back home with our meria.

Sundardas: Have something to eat first.

Ramachandra *invites them to have something to eat, but they decline and do not move.*

Sundardas: What a fine discussion on the Kaliyug, thanks to the ever so enlightened Brahmins of Chowdwar. But why should the Kaliyug be upon us at all? I foresee good times, a bright future. Does the Book have anything to say about the future, Gangadhar?

Gangadhar: *(Reading from the Bible.)* The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. And the suckling child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice' den.

Sundardas: Children, you've heard readings from both the Bhagavat and the Bible. Now listen to what I have to say. Sundardas foresees a golden era of peace and prosperity on earth. Injustice, disputes, lies and exploitation will disappear. Cows will come back home from the fields without having to be herded, countries will have no boundaries and homes no dividing walls. Everyone will be happy and live in plenty. All humanity will live as brothers and sisters. There

will be no wars, no differences, no fights, no diseases, no suffering, no stealing, no lies, no adultery. Tigers and lambs will share the same watering hole. Lions and tigers will befriend human beings. Clouds will pour rain wherever there is need of water. Harvests will be golden. Human beings will realise that they're a part of God. Men and women will wear rich silk clothes and pray together without segregation and realise godhood. *(Pause.)* There's more that Sundardas is able to foresee. The Firinghees who now rule Orissa, after the Moghuls and the Marathas, will come to Sundardas.

Enter a young white Soldier, *as if on a cue. He seems to be in a hurry. He looks around.* Sundardas *notices him, and a smile lights up his face. He continues.*

Sundardas: The Firinghee will come and stand before Sundardas his head bowed.

Let alone bow his head, the Soldier *looks around with unconcealed insolence. He seems to be searching for somebody.*

Sundardas: The Firinghee will come and bow his head before Sundardas.

No change in the Soldier's *attitude.* Sundardas *beckons to* Ramachandra *and whispers something in his ear.* Ramachandra *goes inside the hut. The* Soldier *continues his search and seems to zero in on* Balabhadra. Balabhadra *ducks behind a group of people, trying to escape. The* Soldier *looks for him. Meanwhile* Ramachandra *brings* Sundardas *an old battle fatigue which* Sundardas *puts on. The* Soldier, *engrossed in his search, is completely unaware of what is happening. 'Attention!'* Sundardas *commands in a booming voice. The* Soldier *is startled and salutes him.*

Sundardas: The Firinghee will come and bow before Sundardas. *(The* Soldier *bows his head.)* The Firinghee will accept Sundardas as the only teacher and follow his precepts.

He pauses. There is silence.

Sunderdas: Children, did you see that? The young white boy here became afraid because of how I am dressed. Now, what does that teach you? This: that we see only the clothes, the exterior, and not what is within. Unless we go beyond clothes, unless we cast them

aside, how can we journey within? How can we realise ourselves? *(He takes off the uniform.)* Learn to ignore how people are dressed. Whether I wear these clothes or others, I remain who I am: Sundardas. Think of clay. You can make all sorts of things out of it—bowls, pitchers, plates and cups. Only the names are different, the basic material remains the same. The clay is fundamental to them all, the clay is the truth; the pitchers and vessels are only forms. You must be able to see the clay in them. Just as you must recognise yourselves underneath what you wear. *(Pauses: Raising his hand, he plucks a flower out of air.)* Look at this flower. Just as it has several petals, the human mind too has several layers, several forms; each encloses the mind like a petal. *(He plucks a petal.)* The commands of parents. *(Plucks another petal.)* The advice of elders. *(Plucks yet another.)* The guru's teachings. *(Another petal goes.)* The priest's injunctions. *(Another petal.)* The social code. *(Looks at the flower in his hand.)* Only one more petal is left. What is it—the soul? Or just another form, a covering, an influence? Let's throw that one away too. *(Lets it drop.)* So what remains? What remains is the *atman*. Nothing, you might say, there's nothing. But that nothingness is the *atman*. The Brahman is nothingness. How can one describe nothingness? One cannot ever describe what it is, one can only say what it is not. The Brahman is not you or I. It has no shape, no length, no breadth, no boundaries. It's not creation, nor conservation, nor destruction. Neither male, nor female. Not will, not time. Not striving, nor desire. Not memory, nor roots; not theories, nor explanations, whether subtle or crude; not scriptures, not holy books. Not castes or creeds; not colours or shapes. Not light, nor darkness. Not one, not many. Not the beginning, nor the end. Not birth, not living, not death. Not writing, not the writer. Not the doer, nor the deed. Not heaven, nor hell. Neither good nor bad. Neither right nor wrong. Not emotion, not devotion. Not salvation, not liberation. Not the achiever, not the achievement. Not samadhi, not yoga. Not disease. Not sleep nor wakefulness, not dreams either. There's nothing in the Brahman. It is not anywhere, not in anything. Once in northern India there was a holy man named Kabir who said:

Not in centres of pilgrimage,
Not in idols, not in solitary abodes,
Not in mosques, nor in temples,
Not in Kashi, nor in Kailash.

Kabir mentioned mosques because we know about mosques; the Muslims had been around for a long time. But now a new people have come to us—the Firinghees. How many years ago did they arrive, Gangadhar?

Gangadhar: Twenty-three.

Sundardas: Twenty-three years already? How quickly time passes. The Firinghees have a religion of their own just as the Muslims do. Gangadhar, enlighten these children about how we came to know about the Firinghee religion.

Gangadhar: The Christian padres started preaching their religion in this country a couple of years ago. They printed books and distributed them to people in the crowded marketplaces. Once Krupasindhu got a book of questions and answers from these people when he went to the Tangi market. This was a Catechism. When Radhu Das went to Cuttack to buy sugar, he found a padre distributing a book called the Ten Commandments in Chowdhury Bazaar and brought a copy back.

Sundardas: When I read those books I nearly danced with joy. Children, I said, what a treasure you've got me at last! This is it! These are the basic things. The ethics, the rules of the right way to live. Then my boys went looking for the padres and collected from them the Old Testament, the New Testament, the Gospels. But there's nothing to beat this one book—the Ten Commandments. All the rules of good behaviour have been reduced to just ten. Sundardas too had spoken of these things before, but not with the same lucidity and clarity. Gangadhar, recite the ten Commandments.

Gangadhar: The Ten Commandments of the Lord are: I am the Lord thy God, thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, thou shalt not bow down thyself to them. Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in

vain. Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Honour thy father and thy mother. Thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt not commit adultery. Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, wife, manservant, maidservant nor his goods.

Sundardas: How wonderful, how true! It feels good just to hear them over and over again. So I began telling people about these commandments. And I told my disciples: Sons, go spread the good word. Gangadhar, tell me: Krupasindhu and Radhu Das were supposed to leave yesterday to preach the Ten Commandments, did they go?

Gangadhar: Yes, they did, Baba.

Sundardas: *(Turns to DEVIKA.)* Has Krupasindhu left?

Devika: Yes, Baba.

Sundardas: Oh, we've completely forgotten our Firinghee soldier. *(Turns to him.)* Young man, what brings you here?

Marua: He might be looking for his horse.

The Soldier *looks on uncomprehendingly.*

Marua: Spill it out, Moonface. Tell us what or who you're looking for.

Soldier: *(Speaks in a clipped soldierly style.)* I'm looking for a native infantry soldier who has run away after beating the commissioner's horse-cab driver with a stick.

Sundardas: There doesn't seem to be any native soldier around here.

The Soldier *stares into the faces and grabs Balabhadra, mistaking him for the runaway soldier.* Buda Munda *and* Ratana Pana *grab* Balabhadra's *free arm and pull him towards them. After a few pulls and counter-pulls, the soldier glares at the tribesmen in anger, draws his pistol and chases them away. The two men run for dear life and never return. The* Soldier *stares into* Balabhadra's *face closely and decides he's not the man he's looking for, shakes his head and lets* Balabhadra *go. Saluting* Sundardas, *he exits.*

Marua: Goodbye, Moonface. Go in peace. Hope you soon run into your horse and the missing native soldier.

Sundardas: That takes care of the hill thugs and the soldier. Does anyone else here have a problem?

Kamali: Baba, my husband beats me regularly. He says our child perished because we stopped worshipping idols. But I say God took back our child. Let my husband follow his faith and leave me to mine. Am I not right, Baba?

Sundardas: Absolutely.

Kamali: My husband has threatened to kill me if I don't go back to worshipping idols. And my father beats my mother for the same reason.

Daani: They treat us like cats and dogs, Baba. They tie us up and beat the life out of us.

Sundardas: Praise be to you, mother. One must suffer to remain true to one's faith. Think what Jesus Christ went through. You'll find God, I tell you. There are good days ahead.

Daani: May your words come true, Baba.

Sundardas: Of course they will. *(Looks at* Brahmin I.) Shall we then begin our discussion of the scriptures?

Brahmin I *raises a finger and goes away to relieve himself.*

Sundardas: *(Looks at* BRAHMIN II.) Stay here until your friend comes back. Only a little while ago you were in splits about horses. Do you know what the Brihadaranyak Upanishad has to say?

Sundardas: The human body is a chariot and the senses are horses.

Brahmin II *tucks his sacred thread around his ear indicating that he also needs to relieve himself.*

Sundardas: The atman rides the chariot; wisdom is the charioteer and the mind is the land over which the chariot rolls.

Brahmin II *makes his escape at the first opportunity.* Sundardas *looks up at the sun; it is late in the day. He looks around and finds* Marua *collecting the petals from the ground.* Sundardas *gives her a smile and plucks another flower from the air and is about to present it to her.*

Enter Krupasindhu Sahu *and* Radhu Das, *screaming and crying: 'We were almost killed.' They prostrate themselves before* Sundardas. *He picks*

them up lovingly and pats them on the back. Devika, Krupasindhu's *wife, attends to her husband.* Sundardas *attends to* Radhu Das.

Sundardas: Woe is me, what am I witnessing? Krupasindhu, who has reduced you to such a state, my son? Who subjected my poor Radhu to such torture?

Radhu Das: Baba, we went to Bhairavpur yesterday to preach the Ten Commandments. It seems only a few days ago a mad padre had been there to preach Christianity and the villagers had chased him out of the village. The moment we started preaching they began to call us names. I warned Krupasindhu that we'd do well to leave, but he wouldn't budge until he had recited the commandments.

Krupasindhu: By then the villagers had armed themselves with sticks and rocks. We've chased out a white padre, they shouted, we know how to deal with Blackies; you're no match for us. Then they fell upon us and started beating us within an inch of our lives. But the more they beat the louder I went on about the commandments.

Sundardas: That's terrible, a grave injustice. Gangadhar and Ramachandra, go to Cuttack and inform the padres. We must consult with them. Tell them that Sundardas wants them to come to Kujibar at once. Let them see with their own eyes the plight my children have suffered as a result of preaching their Ten Commandments. Let them tell us how we should go about it. Children, carry Krupasindhu and Radhu Das inside. Take care of them.

The disciples carry Krupasindhu *and* Radhu Das *inside.* Sundardas *notices the flower in his hand and gives it to* Marua. *Everyone watches him with deep respect and fascination.*

Scene II

Kujibar ashram. Early morning. The place has been swept clean and adorned with flowers. A cloth has been spread out on the platform. Sundardas *himself is supervising the arrangements. The place is crowded.*

Sundardas: Children, bring another sheet and spread it out. The padres said they'd arrive early in the morning, didn't they?

Ramachandra: That's what they said, Baba. They must have set

out already; they should be arriving any time now. Gangadhar stayed back to escort them.

Sundardas: Good. Good. What else did the padres say?

Ramachandra: In the evening when they said their prayers we too knelt on the floor, bowed our heads and joined them in worship.

Sundardas: Worship? What was that like?

Ramachandra: One of them began to read aloud from the Book and the rest listened in silence.

Sundardas: That's fine. Did you see the padre who came here?

Ramachandra: No, not him. We saw Padre Lacey and Padre Sutton in Cuttack. There we learned that the padre who came here was Bampton. He lives in Puri, but is forever on the move from place to place on horseback. Curtack today, Ganjam tomorrow. People have started calling him the Horseman Padre.

Sundardas: An appropriate name too.

Voices outside. Enter Gangadhar *with* Lacey *and* Sutton, *both dressed in full padre gear.* Sundardas *prostrates himself before them. The padres pick him up and shake his hand.* Sundardas *welcomes them and leads them to the platform.*

Sundardas: Welcome! Welcome! Welcome to Kujibar ashram! We are fortunate to have the dust from your feet in our humble abode!

Lacey: Let me introduce us. My name is Charles Lacey. I live in Cuttack. *(Points to* Sutton.) He is Amos Sutton. He lives in Balasore, but visits Cuttack every so often.

Sundardas: Very well, very well. So the Company has posted you to Cuttack and him to Balasore?

Sutton: *(With emphasis.)* No, no, we're not employees of the Company. We have nothing to do with it.

Lacey: The East India Company's men are the white collectors, magistrates, police and soldiers you see around. We've been sent by the General Baptist Mission of England. The Company is our foe, not our friend. Some time ago the Company wouldn't even allow missionaries to live within its territory. That's why the people of the Mission took up residence in Serampore, near Calcutta, on Danish

territory. We got permission to preach on the Company's territory only fifteen years ago. The first preacher who arrived in Orissa from Serampore was Brother William Bampton. He went to live in Puri. I came here three years ago, then came Brother Sutton.

Sundardas: A welcome event.

Lacey: When we came to Orissa idol worship was not the only barbaric practice we witnessed. We had heard of widows immolating themselves on the burning pyres of their husbands, and Brother Bampton actually saw one instance of this with his own eyes, when a young Brahmin widow committed sati. I myself saw another, a seventeen-year-old Bengali widow. As she burnt to death people shouted: 'Glory to Lord Jagannath'!

Sundardas: What barbarity!

Sutton: Yet another barbaric practice was people committing suicide by throwing themselves under the wheels of Jagannath's chariot. Brother Bampton once happened upon a body. Dogs were tearing it to pieces, but nobody seemed to bother.

Sundardas: How horrible!

Lacey: During the last chariot festival, just three months ago, Brother Sutton and I saw a man throw himself under the chariot wheels. He was cut into two. Instead of condemning it, people praised the dead man's devotion and piety!

Sundardas: That's horrendous! A matter of deep sorrow. The temple priests play a large role in all this, let me tell you.

Sutton: I've nicknamed them the carrion-eaters of Puti. Their only passion is to bleed the pilgrims dry. They never bother about their welfare. Thousands of pilgrims succumb to disease during the chariot festival every year and Puri simply bursts at the seams with dead bodies, but no one bothers about it!

Sundardas: You do. May God crown your efforts with success.

Sutton: When I arrived in India I found the heat unbearable. 110 degrees! I had never seen so many black people. They all went around half-naked; they sat in the dust and ate with their fingers. I thought to myself, oh God, do I have to live out the rest of my life in the midst of

these creatures! But after a while I got used to it—the people, the climate, the place.

Sundardas: Your Oriya is so good! How is everything with your family?

Sutton: As soon as I reached Cuttack last year, Charlotte fell ill. We took her to Puri hoping that the change of air would do her good, but she left me for God. *(He wipes his eyes.)* We had been married only a year.

Sundardas: How sad!

Sutton: All God's will.

Lacey: We are curious about you, we would like to know something about you.

Sundardas: My name is Sundardas. I don't know my age. Some say I am one hundred years old, but that could easily be an exaggeration. I was once a soldier, the commander of the army in the kingdom of Athgarh. Those days I was fond of big game hunting and would go into the forest whenever I had the chance. One time, when I shot an arrow into a doe, a voice arose within me: Abandon this path, follow the path of truth and piety, that is the right path for you.

Lacey: Something similar had happened to St Paul on the road to Damascus. He received a divine message.

Sundardas: I left Athgarh the same day and came here. At that time there was nothing here. Only a stunted banyan tree, under which I meditated. It took me years but I found the truth I was looking for.

Sutton: Was that the truth of Hinduism?

Sundardas: Hinduism is unlike your religion. You have only one holy book, but we have several—the Vedas, the Vedants, the Upanishads, the Gita. There are people in the hills who don't have written scriptures. The Hindu religion takes on several forms.

Lacey: But all of you believe in idol worship.

Sundardas: I am opposed to it, although I'm a Hindu. You'll not find a single idol in my ashram. For me, a Hindu is someone who follows the path of righteousness.

Sutton: Hinduism is based on the caste system.

Sundardas: Not here, not in this ashram. No one here belongs to any caste; no one is an untouchable here. Of course, originally they are all from different castes: Ramachandra Jachak is a kshatriya, his father Hariwat Rao was a Maratha soldier. Krupasindhu Sahu is a weaver, Sudarshan Raut a peasant, Radhu Das a karan, Daitari Nayak an astrologer. There are three Gangadhars here—Gangadhar Sarangi, Gangadhar Mohanty and Gangadhar Biswal. The first is a brahmin, the second a karan and the third a peasant. And Marua here, she says she has no caste: she belongs to the female caste. We have no restrictions on intermingling; we live together, we eat together.

Sutton: How do Hindus react to all this?

Sundardas: They don't approve. But I tell them: look at clothes drying in the sun, all different colours and sorts, belonging to different people; some people might feel they will become polluted if they touch each other, but does the sun think that? Does the sun make any distinction, does the sun discriminate? It dries them all equally well. Everyone is equal in God's eyes. Who are we to create castes, distinctions, divisions?

Lacey: What kind of teaching you give your disciples?

Sundardas: I tell them: Children, learn, keep an open mind, fill your heart with true knowledge and wisdom. Read the Hindu scriptures, but read the Christians' New Testament as well. Where else will you find someone like Jesus Christ? One person is condemned to swing at the end of the rope but another person comes forward to take his place. That's Jesus Christ for you. Children, that's the greatest act of all. You've got everything here on earth—food, clothes, wisdom. Food will rot, clothes will tear, but wisdom will stay forever. No one can destroy it. Seek it, make it yours. Money won't buy it, but suffering will. Yearn for it, my children.

Sutton: Your disciples preach the Ten Commandments. What do you think of the Commandments?

Sundardas: I preached much the same thing even before I read your book. Don't covet, don't commit adultery, don't worship idols, et cetera. But there I found all the rules nicely grouped together. I

immediately realised that spreading the Ten Commandments would be the mission of my life. And so I started sending people out into the countryside.

Sutton: The Ten Commandments hold the key to our religion too. We heard that your disciples were beaten up when they tried to preach them.

Sundardas: Yes, that's why I asked you to come. What should we do if our people are attacked when they spread God's word?

Lacey: You're not alone in receiving such rough treatment. We too have had our share: people throw rocks, stones and cow dung at us, they drive cattle into our meetings to disrupt them. Of course ignoramuses put our Lord Jesus Christ to no mean suffering. But Jesus said: Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.

Sundardas: How wonderful! Did you hear that, Gangadhar and Ramachandra? Call Krupasindhu and Radhu Das so that they too might hear it. They are blessed since they have received beatings while preaching Christ's teachings. They shall inherit heaven. Glory to Jesus Christ. Gangadhar, do you have anything to ask the padres?

Gangadhar: Baba, what shall we do about Balabhadra?

Sundardas: (*To* Lacey.) You were talking about the practices of Hindus. But there are also the hill people. They practice human sacrifice.

Lacey: We've heard about that and intend to reach them soon the Lord's word.

Sundardas: (*Points to* Balabhadra.) This boy narrowly escaped being sacrificed. He's staying with us now.

Gangadhar: He does not wish to remain here any longer.

Lacey: Send him with us, we'll take care of him. We'll put him to our school. And we request you to start a school here. If you're willing to run it, we'll be happy to build it.

Sundardas: That's an excellent idea. But let Gangadhar visit

your school first. I have a suggestion too. Build a place to stay beside my ashram; you could spend at least a month or two here, if not the whole time. It would be much to our benefit.

Sutton: Thank you for the suggestion. We will think about it.

But we need to settle down in Cuttack. We have already bought a piece of land there to build a chapel. With your help we could build a place to stay here, and a church too.

Sundardas: That would be fine.

Sutton: I'm trying to write an Oriya grammar and I might need your help.

Sundardas: Certainly. Children, any other questions to the padres?

Marua *comes forward.*

Marua: You preach the Ten Commandments out in the countryside. Why don't you first try to convince the Firinghee collectors, magistrates and commanders?

Sundardas: Previously Marua worked in a Firinghee sahib's home, but left when she could stand it no longer. She has been excommunicated by her kinsmen, expelled from her caste.

Lacey: Send her with us. She can help us take care of the girls in the school.

Sundardas: You are taking a son and a daughter from me.

Lacey: You have plenty others.

Sundardas: Still. Every child is dear to his parents. Well, Gangadhar, what about something to eat? Is everything arranged? The padres will eat with us.

Lacey: Oh no, we don't want to inconvenience you. It's time we left.

Sutton: *(Presents* Sundardas *a shawl.)* Please accept this little present.

Sundardas: You are our guests, and leaving without a bite. On top of it, you're giving me a present. But I can you give you nothing. *(Thoughtful pause.)* Gangadhar is the best among my disciples, my favourite. And the most learned too. I like him more than all the

others. He's like my right hand. *(Places his hand on Gangadhar's shoulder.)* I'm an ascetic and possess nothing that I can offer you as a present. I'm giving Gangadhar to you. He will help you preach.

Gangadhar: *(Surprised.)* Baba!

Sundardas: Go with them, son. I will come to Cuttack and see you sometimes.

Sundardas *raises his hand and blesses them.* Lacey *and* Sutton *prostrate themselves before* Sundardas *and he picks them up and pumps their hands.* Lacey *and* Sutton *leave with* Balabhadra, Marua and Gangadhar. *The rest watch them until they're out of sight.*

Act Two

Scene I

The Villagers *on the road 'The Firinghees are coming!' someone shouts, and they all scatter. 'It's only some padres!' announces someone else, and they regroup. Enter* Lacey *and* Gangadhar.

Lacey: Greetings, brothers and sisters!

Gangadhar: *(Whispers to* Lacey.*)* There aren't any women here.

Lacey: Sorry. Greetings, brothers! We've come to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Villager: Go ahead and begin.

Lacey: Our friend Gangadhar here will start with the Ten Commandments.

Villager: No, no. We want you to start.

Villager I: Yes, let's have it from the Firinghee's mouth first.

Lacey: As you wish, brothers. Let me begin with a psalm. *(Sings.)*

Unto thee lift I up mine eyes, O thou that dwellest in the heavens.

Villager: Hail Hari! Glory to the Lord!

Lacey: Jesus Christ said: I dwell in him who eats my flesh and drinks my blood.

Villager: What! Eat Christ's flesh and drink his blood! Are you people monsters?

Noise.

Lacey: *(Raises his voice.)* The meaning is that to keep your faith alive you need to keep feeding it, and there's only one nourishment for twice-born souls: Jesus Christ. All God's children must hunger for him. Without him they will grow weak and sad, and attain nothing.

So approach Jesus Christ with trust and accept him as the only food for the soul. Are you able to follow me?

Villager: Only too well, but go on. Explain some more.

Lacey: The soul is different from the body. The body nourishes itself through the mouth, but the soul derives sustenance from Christ through prayer, humility, meditation, faith, love and gratitude. If someone comes and tells me, look, there will be a big feast but you will only be allowed to look at the spread, will that satisfy me? Unless one actually partakes of the food, what good is it to the body? It's the same with the soul. It needs the body and blood of Jesus Christ for faith and devotion to grow. Do you understand?

Villager: Every word.

Lacey: So put your faith in Jesus Christ. He will forgive you.

Villager: *(Mockingly.)* All right, we believe in your Jesus Christ. There. Now, has he forgiven us?

Gangadhar: This is not something to make fun of.

Villager: No, no, this is manna from heaven, and we are eating it up.

Lacey: Jesus said to pray as follows: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.

Villager: Look, if you're free to commit your sins and pray to your Jesus Christ, then we can commit our own and pray to our gods.

Lacey: Bur which god will you pray to?

Villager: To whoever takes our fancy. We don't exactly want for gods, you know.

Lacey: But you know what happens to someone with his feet in two boats?

Villager: Of course. The fool will drown.

Lacey: So will you if you pray to several gods. Put your faith in one god. He who believes in one god will receive eternal bliss.

Villager: Our Brahman is one.

Lacey: Where is your Brahman?

Villager: Within us.

Lacey: God doesn't reside within the human body. *(He takes out his pocket watch and holds it close to a villager's ear.)* This watch is ticking, its hands moving. Does that mean the creator of the watch is inside it?

Villager: Give it to us and we'll tell you.

The Villagers *take it out of* Lacey's *hand and pass it around.* Lacey *and* Gangadhar *retrieve it with considerable effort.*

Lacey: Now Gangadhar will recite the Ten Commandments.

Villager: All right. It's the black padre's turn. The white one is already tired out.

Villager: So what are these Ten Commandments?

Gangadhar: God Almighty gave them to Moses.

Villager: What! Your god gave them to a mouse?

Gangadhar: No, to Moses. He could see the future. Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me...

Villager: If that's what your god said to your mouse, then that's good enough for you, but we're happy with our gods. We'll continue to worship them. Why shouldn't we?

Lacey: Your gods are all false. They're made of stone and wood.

Villager: For us they're living gods.

Lacey: Your idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands. They have mouths, but they speak not: eyes have they, but they see not. They have ears, but they hear not: noses they have, but they smell not. They have hands, but they handle not: feet have they, but they walk not: neither speak they through their throat. They that make them are like unto them; so is every one that trusteth in them.

Villager: If our gods are nothing, who is running the universe?

Lacey: God the Father.

Villager: That's just it. Because God the Father can't be everywhere at the same time, He has sent out other gods, like Jagannath, Krishna, Ram and Balaram. The same way as your Company of England does. The Company remains in England, but sends judges, magistrates and police here.

Lacey: The Company sends its men to collect revenue, to administer justice. But still the Company is a human creation. And a human being can only be in one place at any given time. But God is omnipresent, omniscient. He is everywhere. He knows everything. Those of us who live in Cuttack do not have an inkling of what's happening in Puri, do we? But God has. God does not need underlings. You said Jagannath, Krishna, Ram and Balaram are all God's deputies. Now take the Company's men—the judges, the magistrates, the police. Can they hope to keep their jobs if they act according to their own wishes rather than follow the Company's rules and regulations? Can your lesser gods lose their jobs the same way?

Villager: What nonsense you're talking. Ram, Balaram, Jagannath aren't the employees of god. God is like a king. Just as a king has to go around at night in disguise to find out the true state of affairs, god takes the forms of Ram and Krishna.

Lacey: God is only one, not many.

A Pundit *elbows his way through the crowd and confronts* Lacey.

Pundit: Your scriptures might say that there's only one god, but ours say there are many paths to Him.

Lacey: Your scriptures are false.

Pundit: Why do you think they're false? After all, our god gave them to us.

Lacey: Can there be impure water in a clean, pure river? God is pure. Would he give us anything impure?

Pundit: No.

Lacey: Your scriptures are unholy, they're false—they aren't a gift from God. Your scriptures cannot save you. Our scripture came

straight from God. It alone can cleanse the mind, wipe away sins. Think about that.

Pundit: Maybe. But our scriptures make as much sense to us as yours to you. Our ancestors found salvation by reading them; who am I to question them? Stop speaking against our scriptures.

Lacey: Our ancestors too worshipped idols; they too practised human sacrifice. But their children received th1e light and gave up those abominable practices. All I ask is that you subject your scriptures to close scrutiny so that you will know the truth.

Pundit: Firinghee, you tread in your path, I will tread in mine. Goodbye.

Exit Pundit.

Villager: That's right, you worship your Christ and we'll worship our Krishna. He'll save us.

Gangadhar: Ha, the same Krishna who couldn't save himself from the arrows of Jara the hill man?

Lacey: Your Krishna was a sinner. He sinned with sixteen hundred Gopi girls.

Villagers: What, badmouthing Lord Krishna? Seize the wretches!

Gangadhar: Calm down, calm down. Just listen to us.

Villagers: This black Brahmin has been eating the crumbs and leftovers of the padres. Hit him!

Villager: Beat them! Lynch them!

The VILLAGERS *push and shove* Lacey *and* Gangadhar, *forcing them to abandon preaching.*

Scene II

The village road. A crowd of villagers. Enter Bampton, *singing loudly.*

Bampton:

If not our sweet lord Jesus Christ
Who else can save?
The world is a cesspool of sin
And our lord is the only redeemer.

Jesus Christ, the son of God!

Pray to him and save your soul!

Brothers, put your faith in Jesus Christ. *(He notices a lone woman in the crowd.)* Sorry. Sister and brothers, put your faith in Jesus Christ. He will save you all.

Villager: Before he saves us, let's see what he looks like. Show us your Jesus Christ.

Bampton: The Lord is in His heaven.

Villager: So go and ask him to show himself. We must see him before we can put our faith in him.

Bampton: It's not necessary to see Him. When a doctor comes to give medicine to a man in the grip of a fever, who's shaking and shivering in agony, does he first demand to see the fever? What will happen to the man if the doctor is so foolish? He'll die, won't he?

Villager: Of course he will.

Bampton: It's the same with Jesus Christ. If you wait until you've seen Him to put your trust in Him, you'll die first. *(Pause.)* Jesus alone can save your soul. Put your faith in Him.

Villager: Oh no. We have our own gods to save our souls—Krishna, Ram, Brahma, Vishnu, Maheswar.

Bampton: Brothers and sister, you couldn't be more mistaken.

God created everything for a purpose. He created the sun, for example, to provide light and warmth. Is it possible for anyone to spurn the sun God created and create one of his own? Does anyone reject rice and live on sand and stone? The same way God sent Jesus Christ as our saviour. As with the sun, so with the Lord. *(Sings* 'Who else can save'.)

Villager: We know all that. Invoking Ram's name will wipe away our sins. *Ra* empties the mind of all sinful thoughts, *ma* prevents all future sins. The same with Govinda's name. The name alone is enough to save us.

Bampton: Only repeating God's name won't help, that won't save you from punishment. Suppose you borrow one hundred rupees from a moneylender, spend it and are no longer in a position to repay

the money. When the moneylender hounds you, do you tell him: Sir, true I have no money to repay you, but I am ready to repeat your name forever and sing your praises? Will he let *you* off? Suppose you don't pay the land revenue taxes. Will you tell the collector that you'll chant his name? Do you steal and when you're caught tell the magistrate that you're ready to repeat his name? Do you hope that the collector or the magistrate will set you free? No, he'll send you to jail. That's why I tell you that just invoking God's name isn't enough. You have to believe in Jesus Christ.

Villager: We believe in our gods because we're able to see them in our temples. How can we believe in Jesus Christ if we haven't seen him?

Villager: These Firinghees don't have temples. What sort of religion is that?

Bampton: Tell me—do you obey the governor general? Do you respect him?

Villager: Of course we do.

Bampton: Have any of you seen him?

Villager: No, but we've heard a lot about him.

Bampton: Have a little patience, and I'll tell you all about Jesus Christ.

Villager: First of all, tell us whether he's dark-skinned or fair.

Bampton: *(Angry, irritated.)* What does that matter?

Villager: Now, now, don't fly off the handle. Our Krishna was dark. What colour was your Christ?

Villager: Look at the poor bugger! He doesn't even know whether Jesus Christ was fair or dark, but see how eager he is to talk about him!

Villager: Never mind. *(Turns to* Bampton.) Speak.

Bampton: Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time: Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you. Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: Whom resist steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the

world. But the God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, establish, strengthen, settle you. To him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen. Now let me explain.

Villager: No need to, we understood every word.

Villager: We had no problem understanding, you speak Oriya very well.

Villager: Try Sanskrit some time.

Villager: Or your own language—the Firinghee tongue.

Bampton: All right, I'll try a little something in English. For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

Villager: (*Turns to* a villager Fakira.) Hey, you there, Fakira. Did you understand that? You've learnt English, haven't you?

Villager: Explain it in Oriya, padre, will you?

Bampton: Loved god the world so much he his only begotten son gave away, not perisheth he who in him believeth but receiveth life everlasting. Clear?

Villager: Crystal clear! Hey Fakira, try your English on the padre, why don't you?

Fakira: *(Shyly.)* Never mind.

Villager: You woman of a man! You only know how to show off to us! In front of the padre you become as quiet as a mouse. Come on, show the Firinghee that we aren't dimwits.

Fakira: You want me to? All right, here I go! *(He rattles off in a singsong voice.)* Dear Sir, I have the honour to acquaint you that I am sick by the fever this for cannot stand nor walk neither rise from slip but pass yesterday at evening here did you order if you will go tomorrow then I will give you some physic and I cannot go for my misfortune and did not cure therefore I pray before you I am very poor man and orphan so gracious grant me grace to avoid from this fever and always to be nourished as any room I am sir your most obedient humble servant Fukeer Chunder Dass.

Villager: Splendid! But did the padre understand you?

Villager: It's getting late. *(Turn to* Bampton.) Come on, distribute your books and be done with it. It's time to go home.

Bampton: I don't have any books. Brother Sutton will give you some next time.

Villager: What, if you didn't have books to distribute, why the hell have you wasted our time?

Villager: *(Tugs at Bampton's bag.)* Look in the padre's bag.

Villager: Give us your horse then. Surely a padre can't be attached to material things!

Bampton: It's not attachment to keep what one needs. Sorry, I can't give away my horse.

Villager: You don't have any books, you won't give us the horse. What are you good for, eh—only lectures? You're asking for a roughing-up.

The Villagers *surround Bampton, who tries to run away. They playfully chase him a good distance.*

Villagers: Hit him with rocks! Pelt the padre with cow dung, shards and stones.

Villagers: Hail Hari! Glory to Hari!

The commotion continues for a while.

Scene III

The Villagers *out on the road, mimicking the padres.*

Villager I: Brothers and sisters, here are the books. Take them, they're yours for free. The Gospel according to Luke, the Gospel according to Mathew, the Gospel according to Mark, the Gospel according to John, the Bible, the Ten Commandments, the Book of Catechism.

Villager *distributes dry leaves.*

Villager I: Listen to God's own words; listen to the Ten Commandments. Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.

Villagers: Hail Hari! Hail Hari!

Villager: Folks, I think I can see a padre headed this way.

Villager I: Let him come, but you're going to hear the Ten Commandments only from me.

Enter Sutton. Villager I *continues his spiel, ignoring him completely.*

Villager I: Thou shalt kill, thou shalt commit all abominations, thou shalt steal and stand false witness against thy neighbour, thou shalt covet thy neighbour's wife and maids and cattle and donkeys and whatever else he has!

Sutton's *face clouds over; he looks askance at the speaker. The speaker simply adds: 'Never do any of the above' and the crowd breaks into peals of laughter. After the laughter subsides,* Sutton *clears his throat.*

Sutton: Take these books, brothers and sisters, they're all for free. The Gospel according to St Luke, the Gospel according to St Mathew, the Gospel according to St Mark, the Gospel according to St John, the Bible, the Ten Commandments, the Book of Catechism.

Villager I: *(To one of his companions.)* This padre is definitely on the Company's payroll. What else could explain distributing books for free? After all, our village astrologer demands a hefty fee just for scratching a few lines on a palm-leaf!

Villager: Let's ask the padre.

Villager I: *(Turns to* Sutton.) These. books you're giving away—haven't they been printed by the Company? How much does the Company pay you to distribute them?

Sutton: These are not the Company's books; they've been printed by the Baptist Mission. The good and the devout people of our country have paid the cost of printing. And they're being distributed free for your benefit.

Villager: But why should the good people of your country waste their good money on the good people of our country?

Sutton: Good Christians that they are they want the words of Christ to reach all corners of the earth.

Villager: Say, what's your salary?

Sutton: *(Irritated.)* What does that matter?

Villager: Frankly, it doesn't. Just a bit of information.

Sutton: We get what little we need for our food and clothing.

Villager: *(To his companions.)* Poor wretch! Doesn't he get enough food in his own country not to have to come here?

Sutton *distributes the books without further arguments.*

Villager: Why don't you distribute some hashish instead of these silly books?

Sutton: What! What did you say?

Villager: Your head!

Sutton: *(Holding his head with both hands.)* My head?

Villager: What have you got inside your head?

Sutton: Knowledge, the knowledge of the Holy Book—the New Testament.

Villager: Read something from it. Let's hear you read.

Sutton: *(Reads.)* Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools. And changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things. Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonour their bodies between themselves: Who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen.

Villager: Now go ahead and explain it.

Sutton: Idol worship, which you practice, is a sin. God does not reside in wood, in stones, or in temples.

Villager: You mean there aren't any images of your gods?

Sutton: Of course not.

Villager: Who do you worship in your temples?

Sutton: We have no temples.

Villager: And no Brahmins either?

Sutton: That's right—no Brahmins.

Villager: What, no priests, no temples? What kind of a religion is that? You seem quite irreligious!

Sutton: Ours is the only true faith, all others are false. Your gods Ram, Krishna, Vishnu and Mahadev are all false gods.

Villager: What sinful words! Hail Hari! Hail Jagannath!

Sutton: Your Lord Jagannath is just a grotesque idol carved out of a block of wood. Eighteen years ago when Jagannath needed a change of body, it was the Company that doled out the five thousand rupees. Let another eighteen years pass and you'll have to make another idol. And who do you think will fork out the money once again? The Company! It's the Company's money that will pay for the wood your Jagannath is carved out of; the Company will pay the carpenters and the painters. So what it all boils down to is this: your Lord Jagannath is a piece of painted wood owned by the Company!

Villager: If Lord Jagannath is just a lump of wood, why do people from all over the world come to Him? If He is nothing, why do people worship Him? Why is the Company wasting its precious money on renewing His images? Why is it paying for the cloth which covers His chariot? Why is it collecting the pilgrim tax at the Eighteen Sluice Bridge?

Sutton: We are not the Company's men, and according to us the Company is totally wrong to do all this.

Villager: So go set your Company straight. You're asking us to give Him up when even your Company can't. Lord Jagannath is our living god; He is our saviour.

Sutton: As I said, your Lord Jagannath is a piece of wood, a piece of neem wood—something to cook food with; something on which owls perch and hoot. Your god is so helpless that he can't save himself when you cut him up in little pieces or set him on fire.

Villager: Hail Hari! Hail Krishna! This padre is bad-mouthing Lord Jagannath. Let's not stay here a minute longer.

Villager I: Let's take the books and be off.

They tear the books from Sutton's *hand and go away. Enter* Sundardas *accompanied by others.* Sutton *shakes his hand and greets him.*

Sutton: Welcome Sundardas. I was telling these people about the Puri temple.

Sundardas: Oh, that temple is a den of vice.

Sutton: Sadhu Sundardas, I beg you to enlighten these people about it.

Sundardas: I have nothing to tell them, but I have something to tell you. You have a responsibility in this regard. In fact, I have addressed a letter to all Christians which I might as well read aloud .

(Takes out a letter and reads it.) O ye favoured people, who are blessed with the divine spirit, ye have existed 1800 years, and what have you done for this dark world? I am a Hindu Boistub, poor and destitute, but ask you neither land, nor elephants, nor horses, nor money, nor palanquins, nor doolies; but I ask, what can be done to teach the people to obey the laws of God. O holy people this I ask. Puri is the heaven of the Hindus; yet there the practices of mankind are adultery, theft, lies, murder of the innocent, whoremongery, eating fish with mahaprasad, disobedience and abuse of parents, defiling of mothers, defiling of sisters, defiling of daughters. Such is the religion of Jagannath. For these crimes, the people are visited with rheumatism, swellings of the legs, leprosy, scrofula, grievous sores, and acute pains, blindness, lameness, and such like. Such are the servants of Jagannath. And now holy people hear the names of the gods of this people—gods which the people, when they have eaten rice and worship—these are gold, silver, brass, cedar, stone, wood, trees, fire, water etc, these be the names of their gods, and these be their servants. To serve these gods, they burden themselves with expensive ceremonies and costly rites; they afflict their bodies, and their souls with pilgrimages and many cruelties. The Brahmuns no longer observe the Vedas, nor the devotees keep mercy. O ye Christian rulers, ye feed the rich, the proud and the great; while the poor and the destitute are dying in want. O good fathers; good children, good people, hear the cries of the poor, O good people.

The thief is judged, the murderer is judged, the perjurer is judged, and all the wicked are punished according to their crimes. A large army is kept in obedience to your orders. But why are not the people made to obey the laws of God? Ye are the seed of the good, ye keep God's word.

Exit Sundardas. Sution *tries to follow him, but* Sundardas *turns to forbid him and vanishes. A little later the* Villagers *gather.* Sutton *seems to receive a new surge of enthusiasm.*

Sutton: Brothers and sisters, here, take these books. They are being given away for free. The Gospel according to St Luke, the Gospel according to St Mathew, the Gospel according to St Mark, the Gospel according to St John, the Sermon on the Mount, the Ten Commandments, the Book of Catechism, the Holy Bible.

No one shows any interest. Sutton *tries to press the books on them.*

Villagers: We don't want them, we won't take them.

Sutton: Free, free! No money.

Villagers: We won't take them even if you pay us.

Villager: He's out to rob us of our caste and religion by giving us printed paper for free.

Villager: They've put a hex on their printed books; we must not touch them. *(Turns to* Sutton.) We have our palm-leaf scriptures, thank you very much. We don't need yours.

Villagers: *(Among themselves.)* Run, folks, run. If we accept the padre's books we'll have no choice; we'll be under his spell.

The Villagers *scatter in all directions, without taking the books.* Sutton, *surprised, stands rooted to the ground.*

Scene IV

Bampton *is seen preaching to a crowd on a village road.*

Bampton: Brothers, I've come to show you the path to salvation, how to avoid hell. Hell is full of fire, sulphur and brimstone. The Holy Book says that sinners will be sent to hell. All human beings are sinners; but there is hope nevertheless. Listen carefully. There's only one god, and he loves all human beings. Even Hindus. He has a son, whose name is Jesus Christ. Jesus was originally with god in heaven, but god loved the earth so much that he sent his son down to save the human race, so that they wouldn't be destroyed but attain eternal life instead. Jesus Christ sacrificed himself for our sins; he gave up his life for us. If we put our faith in him, his blood will cleanse us of sin. That

is the only path to salvation; there is no other. There is no other saviour. Learn about him and attain heaven.

Bampton *distributes the books.* Villagers *chant 'Hail Hari' and disrupt the distribution before leaving en masse.* Irun *stays behind. When* Bampton *leaves, he follows him.*

Bampton: Why are you following me?

Irun: Padre sir, I want to become a Christian.

Bampton: Are you mocking me?

Irun: *(Touches his ears.)* No sir!

Bampton: What's your name?

Irun: Irun Senapati.

Bampton: If you wish to become a Christian, first wipe the holy ash off your forehead.

Irun *wipes his forehead.* Bampton *helps him.*

Bampton: Now throwaway the charm you're wearing.

Irun: *(Fingers the charm.)* It's made of silver, sir.

Bampton: Unless you throw it away, I won't convert you.

Irun *breaks it into pieces and offers them to* Bampton.

Irun: There. Take the pieces.

Bampton: Now you have cast off your old religion.

Irun: If you say so. But if someone asks you whether I have eaten in your place, please deny it even if it were true.

Bampton: I never tell lies. Where can I find some water?

Irun: Ramalinga Pond is nearby.

Bampton: Let's go there.

Exit Bampton *and* Irun. *The pond.*

Bampton: Do you worship Hindu gods?

Irun: No.

Bampton: What, you don't?

Irun: No sir.

Bampton: What is your opinion about Hindu scriptures?

Irun: They're all false.

Bampton: You are a sinner.

Irun: Maybe so.

Bampton: Who saves sinners?

Irun: Who?

Bampton: Jesus Christ. And what did he do to save sinners?

Irun: I remember what you said: He gave up his life to save sinners.

Bampton: Who shall be saved?

Irun: He who believes in Jesus Christ.

Bampton: Do you believe in Jesus Christ?

Irun: Yes sir.

Bampton: Will you follow his teachings?

Irun: Yes sir.

Bampton: Jesus Christ said not to work on the Sabbath. Will you obey him?

Irun: Gladly, sir. Who wants to work?

Bampton: Are you ready to be baptised?

Irun: What is that, sir?

Bampton: I will dunk you in water and baptise you.

Irun: I will drown, sir. I don't know how to swim. And if I die my two wives will die too.

Bampton: Let's get into the water.

Bampton *pushes* Irun's *head under water.*

Bampton: I baptise you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.

Irun: Very well.

Bampton: You are the first Oriya to convert. The first Christian of Orissa.

Irun: I am not Oriya, sir. I'm Telugu.

Bampton: Telugu? Then we will have to look for an Oriya, the first Oriya Christian, the first success of the Orissa Baptist Mission. *(Thinks.)* Sundardas. Yes, he's the ideal choice.

Irun: What am I to do now, sir?

Bampton: Will your people accept you, will they let you into your house?

Irun: Never sir! I've lost my caste. Who will let me into the house?

Bampton: What was your caste?

Irun: Weaver. Now it is god's caste.

Bampton: Now that you have become a Christian, what does that matter? What do you wish to do?

Irun: I want to march straight into the Jagannath temple at Puri flanked by you and the king of Puri and challenge Him to produce His miracles. If He doesn't then I'll kick Him about a bit. That will show people that He counts for nothing.

Bampton: What else?

Irun: Smash to pieces all the idols and statues all the world over.

Bampton: Very well. All that can wait. First come and have some tea with me.

Enter Madman.

Madman: Where is he? Where is the padre? Where is Jesus Christ? Where is god? Where is the horse? Oh, Lord God, our Father thou art in Heaven, I am a miserable sinner. The greatest sinner on earth; none worse than me. There are no depths to my depravity; I deserve to go to Hell.

Enter some Villagers, *looking for* Madman.

Villager: There you are!

Madman: Oh Lord, you are the saviour of the helpless, you sent your son Jesus Christ to save the miserable and the wretched of the earth. He shed his precious blood to save sinners. It is to him that I pray to save my soul, to rid me of my sins.

Madman *holds* Bampton *in a tight embrace.*

Bampton: Let go.

Madman: Never. I will never let go of you, I will cling to you. I will pray to my new god, I will become a devotee of Jesus Christ.

Villager: What did you say, you wretch? Become a Christian, will you? Eat beef? Drink wine? Sleep with Firinghee women? Sick of the Hindu religion already, is that right? Just because you can't do any of those things, huh?

Madman: Oh Jagannath, Radhakrushna, Rama, Govinda, Keshab, Daitari, Mahadev, Chandi, Chamundi, Bhairav, Ganesh; oh Kali, Bagala, Chhinnamasta, Bhubaneswari, Matangini, Sodashi, Dhumawati, Tripurasundari, Bhairavi; oh thirty-three million thousand gods, oh ten incarnations of Vishnu; oh gurus, Brahmins, idols and deities; oh mantras, yantras, vedas, vedantas, Bhagavat, Ramayan, Parayan, Narayan; oh Kasi, Vrindavan, Dwarka, Ganga; oh matted hair, holy marks across the forehead, rites and rituals, festivals and worship, consecrated prasad and mahaprasad—everything is false.

Villager: *(Beats* Madman.) What did you say—all false? What is true then, you wretch?

Madman: Our Father, thou art in Heaven, Jesus Christ, padre, horse. They are all true.

Villager *slaps* Madman. Bampton *and* Irun *try to stop him.*

Villager: If you become a Christian, what will become of your wife and children? *(Pause.)* Fearing you might try to run away, we gave you a drink spiked with dhatura, but nothing seems to have any effect. We took you to the goddess at Jajpur, paid the Brahmin priests to say prayers for you, had the scriptures read out loud, but nothing has made any impression. What you really need is a sound thrashing.

Madman: *(Sings.)* The love of Jesus Christ is without parallel; there is nothing like it anywhere.

Villager: Shut up. Sing from the Bhagavat.

Madman: Not from the Bhagavat.

Villager *beats him.*

Madman: Stop it, stop it. I'm willing to sing from the Bhagavat.

Hail Nrushingha, holy thou art,
Thou art the cause of it all,
Thou art without beginning,
Without middle and end,
Nothing moves without your command.
Thou created the senses,
Thou art the Truth.

Madman *grabs* Bampton *once again.*

Madman:

Lucky is he who is Christian

He is a king without a throne

Lord God is his father and protector

Jesus Christ is his brother and saviour.

The Villagers *pull him from* Bampton. Bampton *and* Irun *pull him towards them, Pulled .from both sides,* Madman *continues to sing.*

Madman: Listen, oh you King Parikshita, listen to the legends of Lord Krishna.

Bampton *and* Irun *succeed in pulling* Madman *towards them.*

Madman: Listen, oh almighty King Parikshita, listen to the legends of Jesus Christ, listen to the Bible.

Madman, *pulled to and fro, falls to the ground.* Villager *picks him up quickly and drags him away.* Bampton *mutters under his breath: 'Sundardas', as if the holy man of Kujibar could provide the solution.*

Scene V

Lacey *and* Sutton *are in the middle of a discussion in the street.*

Lacey: It's been nearly six years since we set up the Mission in Orissa, but we're yet to convert a single Oriya. Irun Senapati doesn't count; he's a Telugu.

Sutton: I had set high hopes on Sundardas; I thought he would be our first Oriya convert, but he's proved elusive.

Lacey *puts his finger to his lips signalling for silence. They both look up the street and see* Sundardas *walking away in the distance. They follow him.* Sundardas *looks over his shoulder and gestures to them not to follow, but the padres do nevertheless.* Sundardas *vanishes in the blink of an eye. In his place the padres see* Gangadhar. *They hurry and catch up to him,*

Lacey: (*To* Gangadhar.) Well, have you made up your mind?

Gangadhar: It's been made up for a long time. The only problem is that my relatives have been threatening me.

Sutton: Cut yourself off from your relatives.

Gangadhar: I would, but they won't.

Enter the Villagers.

Villagers: Look, look, Brother Gangadhar is here. The padres have done a good job of keeping him from us.

Lacey: (*To* Gangadhar.) Tell them what you've decided.

Gangadhar: Yes, it's time that I did.

Villagers: Enough is enough, Brother Gangadhar, it's time you returned home. How long will you eat the crumbs, the leftovers from the padres' table?

Gangadhar: Listen to me, please. You've known me since I was a child. You know how I've always hungered for enlightenment. I read our scriptures, observed fasts and vigils, spent a good deal of time in worship. I pestered every Brahmin and sadhu I came across to share true knowledge with me, but their only advice was penance and more penance, worship and more worship. No one could tell me how to get rid of sin, how to escape hell. I was advised to go to the Jagannath temple. I went and offered prayers. But to no avail. Once while I was going around Lord Jagannath on his diamond-studded throne I even stuck a needle into Him, but nothing happened. Then I finally landed in Kujibar ashram, and it was Sundara Baba who opened my eyes. It was he who explained to me that gods and goddesses are all false, that the caste system is evil. It was there that I read with him the books handed out by the padres, and saw the light. It was the Bible that finally saved me. When I read about Jesus Christ, it struck me that I was one of the sinners for whom Jesus had laid down his life. I began to pray to him to give me strength to keep my faith unwavering until I die. I've decided to receive baptism and become a Christian.

Villager: All right, but come with us to the village first. We have all the time in the world to discuss your conversion.

Gangadhar: No. I won't go with you until I've been baptised.

Villagers: We refuse to leave without you.

Lacey: *(To the* Villagers.) I'm taking Gangadhar to the Mahanadi river to be baptised. You may return to your village.

Gangadhar *and* Lacey *proceed to the river and down the bank into the water. The* Villagers *crowd around them.*

Lacey: (*To* Gangadhar.) Do you believe in god?

Gangadhar: Yes.

Lacey: But Hindus speak of many gods—Brahma, Vishnu, Maheswar, and a host of others besides!

Gangadhar: They are all false gods.

Lacey: Will you give them up?

Gangadhar: Yes.

Lacey: What about the charm you wear around your neck?

Gangadhar *tears off the string of basil beads and hands it to the padre.*

Lacey: Are you ready to repent?

Gangadhar: Yes.

Lacey: Do you believe in Jesus Christ for your redemption?

Gangadhar: Yes.

Lacey: Will you obey Christ's teachings until you die?

Gangadhar: Yes sir, I will.

Lacy *dunks* Gangadhar *in the water.*

Lacey: I baptise you in the name of God the father, God the Son and the Holy Ghost.

Gangadhar: Very well.

The Villagers *shout Hail Hari and discuss* Gangadhar's *conversion; they leave, threatening him.*

Villagers: All right. We're going back. But remember, from this moment you have been ostracised. You can't obtain water or fire from anyone in the village. You'd better stay away, if you value your life. If you set foot in the village you might be stoned to death.

Sutton, Lacey *and* Gangadhar *notice* Sundardas *in the distance and run after him.* Sundardas *looks over his shoulder and gestures not to follow him, but they persist.* Sundardas *vanishes in the twinkling of an eye, and in his place is* Ramachandra. *They catch hold of him. Enter soon afterwards* Ramachandra's *wife, his elderly mother, his children and some people from his village. They surround the padres,* Gangadhar, *and* Ramachandra.

Ramachandra's Mother: *(To* Ramachandra.) Did I carry you in my womb for nine months to see this? Why didn't you die the moment you were born?

Ramachandra's Wife: Are you under the spell of some witch?

Ramachandra's Son: Father, if you become a Christian, I will hang myself.

Villagers: Ramachandra, look at Barabati Fort, where your father was once the chief. As the son of such an illustrious person, how can you be so eager to become a padre's slave? Better to die than to blacken the faces of the Hindus!

Silence.

Villagers: Better to take to begging or to performing the duties of the low-castes than to convert to Christianity! You're no longer part of the community. We don't want to see your face any longer. Let's go, let the unfortunate dog stay back to scour for the scraps off the padre's table.

They try to pull Ramachandra *away, but he resists. Exit* Villagers. Sutton *and* Lacey *lead Ramachandra into the river for his baptism.*

Lacey: Do you wish to embrace Christianity?

Ramachandra: Yes.

Sutton: Why?

Ramachandra: Because I believe in Christ.

Lacey: How deeply do you believe in Christ?

Ramachandra: With all my heart and soul.

Sutton: Do believers remain in sin?

Ramachandra: No.

Lacey: Do you sin by telling lies, uttering vile curses, shouting at people?

Ramachandra: No longer. I've given all that up.

Sutton: You once worshipped idols?

Ramachandra: Yes.

Lacey: Do you still?

Ramachandra: No, no longer. I swept all the idols into a cloth bundle and tied it to the ceiling and threw dirt on it; some idols broke, the rest I set fire to.

Sutton: Have you consulted anyone about your conversion?

Ramachandra: My own people. The villagers too. They were all up in arms against the idea. I consulted Gangadhar, and he was encouraging. I spoke to Sundara Baba, but he put me off.

Lacey: Are you still willing to convert?

Ramachandra: Yes.

Lacy *baptises* Ramachandra.

Lacey: I baptise you in the name of God the Father, God the Son and the Holy Ghost.

Ramachandra: Very well.

They notice Sundardas *in the distance and follow him.* Sundardas *looks over his shoulder to forbid them, but they do not take heed.* Sundardas *vanishes suddenly, and in his place is* Krupasindhu Sahu. *They drag* Krupasindhu *into the water.*

Sutton: (*To* Krupasindhu.) Do you believe in the Hindu gods?

Krupasindhu: No.

Lacey: What about Hindu scriptures?

Krupasindhu: They're all false.

Sutton: Are you a sinner?

Krupasindhu: Yes, I am.

Lacey: Who redeems sinners?

Krupasindhu: Jesus Christ.

Sutton: What did he do for sinners?

Krupasindhu: He gave up his life.

Lacey: Who shall be redeemed?

Krupasindhu: Those who believe in Jesus Christ.

Sutton: Do you believe in Jesus Christ?

Krupasindhu: Yes.

Lacey: Are you ready for baptism?

Krupasindhu: Yes.

Sutton *baptises* Krupasindhu.

Sutton: I baptise you in the name of God the Father, God the Son and the Holy Ghost.

Krupasindhu: Very well.

They notice Sundardas *in the distance and run after him.* Sundardas *looks over his shoulder and signals for them not to follow, but they do not pay attention. Suddenly* Sundardas *vanishes, and in his place are* Kamali *with her ten-month-old baby at her breast, and her mother,* Daani. *The padres drag them to the river. They clearly hear* Sundardas *say: 'No!' but they do continue on.*

Kamali: I want to become a Christian.

Daani: Yes sir. Convert both me and my daughter.

Gangadhar: You have been to Sundara Baba, no? How did he react to the idea?

Kamali: He told us not to convert, to go back to our homes, but we decided to come here anyway.

Daani: Our menfolk were away when we left home.

Kamali: I left my elder daughter with a neighbour and brought this little child along; she's still to be weaned.

Daani: Please convert us without delay. If our men turn up here before the conversion, they will make trouble.

Lacey: Have you made up your minds?

Kamali: Absolutely. We wish to become Christians.

Daani: We are sinners. Our own gods could do nothing to save us. Only Christ can save us.

Enter Villagers, *among them the husbands of* Kamali *and* Daani. *There is commotion.*

Kamali's Husband: How dare you leave home on your own? Have you forgotten you're a woman? Come with me, let's go back.

Kamali: We have come here to become Christians.

Daani's Husband: What, have you taken leave of your senses? Where's your modesty, your manners? How could two women leave the village on their own and venture into town? Come on, come back home. You have to be purified.

Daani: Not before we embrace Christianity.

Kamali's Husband: Forget it. We won't let you do any such mad thing.

Villagers: This bloody padre has addled their brains. Before they

concentrated on converting men, now they are after women as well. Who'd have imagined the day would come when docile Hindu women would boldly leave home to become Christians!

Lacey: I'm not forcing them to convert. You're free to persuade them to go back home with you. They're welcome to leave.

Villagers *try to persuade* Kamali *and* Daani, *but fail.* Kamali *and* Daani *remain steadfast in their resolve.*

Daani's Husband: *(To* Villagers.) Let's go back. Leave the women alone. We shouldn't even look at sinners like them for too long.

Kamali's Husband: These two wretched women have crossed over to the side of the Firinghees and lost their dignity, chastity and character. All relations with them are broken off as of this moment.

Daani's Husband: It's as if they had died. We must hurry home and observe the funeral rites. Come, let's get a move on. No point in witnessing this transgression.

Exit Villagers. Sutton *and* Lacey *wade into the water with* Kamali *and* Daani.

Lacey: (*To* Kamali.) Are you ready for baptism?

Kamali: Yes.

Sundardas's *voice is heard from afar: 'No!'*

Sutton: (*To* Daani.) You are sure you want to be baptised?

Daani: Yes.

Again Sundardas's voice is heard: 'No!' Sutton *and* Lacey *baptise the two women.*

Sutton: (*To* Daani.) I baptise you in the name of God the father, God the Son and the Holy Ghost.

Lacey: (*To* Kamali.) I baptise you in the name of God the father, God the Son and the Holy Ghost.

Daani: Very well.

Kamali: Very well.

Sundardas's *voice is heard from afar: 'No, no, no!'*

Act Three

Scene I

Three years later. Charles Lacey's *house in Cuttack.* Lacey's *wife,* Ann, *assisted by* Marua, *is tidying up the drawing room.*

Ann: Mary, is everything ready for the tea?

Marua: Yes, Sister.

Ann: We're expecting quite a few guests.

Marua: Brother Lacey's certainly taking a long time to get back home.

Ann: He went to the chapel. He should be here any moment now.

Marua: Who is coming to tea, Sister?

Ann: Brother Sutton from Balasore; Brother Bampton from Puri, he's been in town for two days already; and Brother Pears of the Christian Missionary Herald. Have the cups and plates been washed and wiped?

Marua: *(Lays the table.)* Yes, Sister. Everything's ready.

Ann: I'll see to the tea. You tidy up the table and arrange the cutlery.

Exit Ann.

Marua: Where are the forks? These people have hands just like everyone else but when it comes to eating they ask for forks! David! *(Getting no reply, in a raised voice.)* David!

Balabhadra *steals in silently. He is wearing pants and a shirt.*

Marua: Have you gone deaf or something? I must have shouted your name ten times!

Balabhadra: What am I to do if people keep changing my name? How many names can I remember? In the village it was Balia. The Kondhs called me Meria. Sundara Baba changed it to Balabhadra. And here I'm called David.

Marua: So what? I was Marua in the village, but Mary here. Call me Mama and I say, yes; call me Mary and I say, yes sir; if some one calls me Darling, I will say, yes dear!

Balabhadra: Listen Marua, I'm planning to run away.

Marua: Do what you want, but first arrange the forks on the table. I can see that you're not the kind to settle down anywhere.

Balabhadra: *(Fiddling with the forks.)* The forks are right under your nose. Can't you see them? Not only have you lost your faith by living with the Firinghees, you've lost your eyesight too. Why don't you become a Christian and be done with it? That Christian cook Abraham is mad about you.

Marua: Abraham's no longer a cook. Didn't you know? That smart Bengali boy has picked up Oriya so well that the padres have pressed him into preaching. Guess what his salary is—seven rupees a month! But look at you—you've lived here for a long time but are still the dimwit you were before, no improvement at all.

Balabhadra: Look, I may not have gone to school, but I'm no fool. I can tell you all about Creation if you want. In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light; and there was light. Do you understand, Marua, Mary?

Marua: Yes sir, Balia, Meria, Balabhadra, David! But I don't need to know about their Creation. Let the devils have their own ideas. I want nothing to do with them, and nothing to do with their religion either. Let Sundara Baba and Padre Lacey worry about that. All that matters to me is that I have to work, earn my wages, live out the rest of my days, that's all. If in the midst of it all you happen to get a smile and a kind word from someone, consider yourself lucky.

Balabhadra: You talk as if you were better off in the village!

Marua: Women's fate is always the same, whether we're in the village or the town. In the village the rich and the Brahmins are after us; here it is the Firinghees. What difference does it make?

Balabhadra: Why don't you become a Christian?

Marua: How did conversion help Kamali and her mother? It was like going from the frying pan into the fire. Their husbands threw them out, and now they're on the street.

Balabhadra: Bloody hell. It'd be a lot better if there was no religion at all. Look, I don't have a religion. My father was very religious, but he sold me off for a few filthy coins. The Kondhs fed and fattened me so that I'd make a good sacrifice. Then I came to the ashram where there was no god but a hundred and one dos and don'ts. And now I am with these Firinghee mlechhas. What religion do I have?

Marua: Be happy then.

Balabhadra: But how? Is this my home? Was the ashram my home? Or the Kondh village? My home is in my village, where I was plain Balia—not Balabhadra, not David. I'm always thinking about my village. What about you, do you ever think about yours?

Marua: A woman doesn't belong anywhere. Wherever she lives is her village. Whoever takes her is her husband, lord and master; wherever he takes her is her home. Understand? Take Ann memsahib. Just because she married the padre she's crossed seven seas to set up home here. And mind you all she does is offer tea to the padre's guests. Now get on with the work, boy, and get the table ready.

Enter Lacey, Sutton, Gangadhar, Radhu Das. *They proceed to the table.*

Sutton: With all those trees and shrubs the chapel looks beautiful.

Radhu Das: It is a holy place. The Hindus always choose fine sites for their temples.

Sutton: The first church in Orissa has been built on the ruins of a temple—that's a good sign.

Raghu: A good sign? The Muslims razed Hindu temples and

built mosques on the same site. Now the Christians are doing the same thing with their churches.

Lacey: But the Shiva temple was already in ruins and nobody ever offered prayers there. Isn't it a good thing that a place of worship has been built there, so what if it's a church?

Sutton: A place of true worship where once was a den of heathen practices. Monstrous idols replaced by the living Jesus Christ; the cacophony of primitive rituals replaced by quietude and sibilant prayers to God and the Lamb.

Lacey: The light from the church will illuminate the whole of Orissa.

Sutton: May the time come soon when there will be only churches and no temples. All heathen temples should be razed to the ground.

Lacey: That will be a wonderful day for Orissa.

Sutton: When I looked at the chapel this morning, I couldn't help but love this land of Orissa. There's everything here: fertile soil, dense forests, green hills, full rivers, everything. If only Oriyas would take to the Bible, this place would become paradise on earth. It would yield gold, it would turn into the land of Emmanuel. It would be full of places of living worship; but instead of temples there would be churches everywhere. It would be full of blessed folks, all worshipping the one true God; its roads would be teeming with pilgrims and they would all be seekers of the true faith. The only scripture would be the Holy Bible. There would be songs on the lips of its people but those will be the joyous prayers extolling God and the Lamb. All Oriya parents would become true Christians and observe the Sabbath.

Lacey: *(Flips open the Bible and reads.)* The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them; and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose. It will blossom abundantly, and rejoice even with joy and singing: the glory of Lebanon shall be given unto it, the excellency of Carmel and Sharon, they shall see the glory of the Lord, and the excellency of our God.

Sutton: Amen.

Lacey: Once, a long time ago, when I was walking down a road, I sat down on a Hindu idol and asked my servant to find out what passers-by thought about that. He reported that they said only a Firinghee sahib could do this, for he was so strong that he feared no one.

Raghu: Does that mean you will raze our temples to the ground?

Radhu Das: Brother, why are you obsessed with that idea? Where was your temple here?

Raghu: Have you forgotten that there was a Shiva temple on the very site where the church now stands?

Radhu Das: Aeons ago. All we ever saw was rubble. The place was a wilderness, crawling with snakes, jackals and other beasts. Did anybody ever visit the deity or offer worship?

Raghu: No matter. I'm not going to sell away my piece of land. My land houses a holy Hanuman temple.

Radhu Das: What Hanuman temple? Where? There's only a stone image of Hanuman under the open sky exposed to the elements.

Raghu: For us the temple is wherever there's an idol.

Radhu Das: But is the idol being worshipped?

Raghu: Not being worshipped doesn't make any difference to a god. Worship can resume at any moment. Anyway, haven't you noticed that the idol of Hanuman is dabbed with vermilion? Tell your padre I won't sell my land.

Radhu Das: But I know you, Brahmin! If the price is right you'll readily sell your gods! So stop bluffing and tell us the price.

Raghu: Sorry, the land is not for sale.

Radhu Das: *(To* Lacey.) He says he won't sell the land. *(To* Raghu.) Then you may leave, Brahmin. (Raghu *does not budge.)* All right, now get a move on. There's no point sitting here. Surely you won't take tea and biscuits in a Firinghee mlechha's home, will you?

Raghu: But who's talking to you?

Lacey: So what's your best price?

Raghu: (*Looks at* Radhu Das, *but speaks to* Lacey.) I will come some other time. We need to talk one to one.

Lacey: No need for further discussion, if you're unwilling to sell the land.

Raghu: I never said I was unwilling. All I said was I'd never sell the statue of Lord Hanuman. Our gods are not for sale, no matter how high the price.

Exit Raghu.

Lacey: Radhu Das, what do you think—will he sell his land?

Radhu Das: Sir, I know him better than the back of my hand. Take it from me that the sale is already decided. The only thing that remains to be sorted out is the price.

Lacey: We badly need that piece of land because it adjoins the chapel. If we have it, we'll build a house for Gangadhar on it. The poor man lost his house and land by becoming a Christian. Besides, it will be of immense help if he lives nearby. *(To* Gangadhar.) What do you say, Gangadhar?

Gangadhar: That would be fine.

Sutton: What about paying a visit to Saint Sundardas and convincing him?

Gangadhar: I've been visiting him off and on, but lately he's been barely civil to me. He's upset over our conversion. He's angry with everyone—Ramachandra, Krupasindhu, everyone. He flew into a towering rage when he heard that Kamali and her mother had converted against their husband's wishes.

Sutton: But we didn't force anyone into Christianity! Each one of you was a willing convert. We preach, and those who come to us do so on their own.

Enter the Villagers, *followed by* Bampton. *For once the padre is dressed in his regular gear, he is even wearing shoes. Between persistent coughings he sings a psalm.*

Bampton: I was out preaching at Chandini Chowk this morning but could hardly get going. *(Coughs.)* I can't stop coughing. I hadn't brought enough books for the people there, so these have followed me back to get their copies.

Lacey *gets some books and distributes them.*

Bampton: Brother Lacey, I'm not in a position to preach. *(Breaks into a spell of coughing.)* Please tell these brothers a little about Jesus Christ.

The Villagers *squat down on the floor, ready to listen.*

Lacey: Brothers, I'll begin with the birth of Jesus Christ. *(He opens the Bible and reads from it.)* Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together...

From the back Marua *stifles an urge to vomit.* Lacey *turns pale. Everyone is taken by surprise. After a few moments of tense silence, Lacey raises his voice unnaturally high and plods on.*

Lacey: She was found with the child of Holy Ghost. Then Joseph her husband being just man, and not willing to make her a public example, was minded to put her away privily. But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.

Lacey *stops for breath.* Marua *is still being sick.*

Bampton: Patience, Mary. I'll give you some medicine. *(Coughs.)*

Marua: It must be the fish I ate last night; it wasn't fresh.

Lacey *heaves a sigh of relief.* Bampton *coughs.*

Lacey: (*To the* Villagers.) I'll tell you how Jesus Christ fed five hundred people with just a few fish.

Villagers: Don't bother. We've heard enough already, and seen enough too. Now we'll read these books and find out for ourselves.

Exit the Villagers.

Sutton: Brother Bampton, please don't keep singing that song. I'll write you a new one.

Bampton: Sorry, Brother Sutton. It just happens to be my favourite. *(Coughs.)* Please don't ever ask me to stop singing it.

Sutton: But Brother, I'll write you a proper Oriya song. I might not be as good in Oriya as you or Brother Lacey are—well, blame it on my voice and accent—but I've studied the language quite thoroughly.

It's a rich language and has more ancient texts than might be imagined; unfortunately, they all deal with the Hindu religion one way or another. I'm currently at work on Oriya grammar.

Bampton: *(Despite rising waves of coughing.)* I find the old song good enough. Brother Carey taught it to us at Serampore. His native accountant penned it in praise of Jesus Christ.

Sutton: Strange that Carey's accountant, who was a die-hard Hindu, and who resisted all attempts at conversion, should have written such a wonderful prayer.

Lacey: I think the fellow was something like our Sundardas.

Gangadhar: But don't cherish any hopes of Baba ever consenting to convert.

Lacey: What did he tell you when you met him last?

Gangadhar: He said he'd drop in one of these days to have it out with you. He's no longer his old self; he's a changed man. After Kamali's and her mother's baptism he has no kind words for you; in fact, he denounces you.

Sutton: What a strange land! Anybody's free to convert out of his or her own free will. Why should anyone take umbrage at that?

Lacey: Ramachandra's wife left him after his conversion, but now she's back with him.

They notice that Bampton *has fallen asleep.* Sutton *rouses him and he wakes up with a start and asks for his horse. Everyone laughs.*

Sutton: The only thought Brother Bampton has on his mind is to ride from one place to another and preach.

Lacey: Wherever he finds a marketplace, a temple, a bazar, a fair, or a village on his way, he dismounts and begins to preach the word of the Lord.

Bampton: *(In a fit of coughing.)* I'm not doing too well. I find it increasingly tiring to ride a horse.

Lacey: You'll be all right soon.

From outside the sound of a palanquin being lowered on the ground. Enter Pears.

Lacey: Welcome, Brother Pears!

They all greet him. Enter Ann. *She and* Pears *shake hands and ask after each other's welfare.* Ann *and* Marua *serve tea.*

Pears: I didn't realize the Puri road was so bad. The trip took a long time. The visit was a waste of time because Brother Bampton had already left for Cuttack.

Bampton *who has fallen asleep again is awakened by* Lacey.

Bampton: *(Waking up with a start.)* And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, of the Son, and the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.

Pears: Wonderful, Brother Bampton! You're exactly like what I'd heard about you. But I had expected to see you in native dress.

Bampton: When I first came to work in Orissa I thought shame upon me as a padre, and as an Englishman too, if I cannot dress and behave like a Hindu native, so I gave up wearing shoes and wore only a dhoti and a vest. It's a lot easier to negotiate the mud and puddles dressed like that than in our Western clothes. The natives too took to me because of how I was dressed, but soon I realised that it did me no good; they were only laughing at me. My feet bled and I found it hard to walk about. The leeches got at me freely. So in the end I had to stop dressing like a native.

Pears: You're not too well. Why don't you move to Cuttack? Sticking to Puri is not going to do you any good.

Bampton: The whole of Orissa is a land of heathens and Puri is the centre of their evil empire. So I decided to live right there. I thought preaching in front of the Jagannath temple would be like pulling at the lion's whiskers in its own den!

Pears: But there's not a single convert to show for all that.

Bampton: Brother, you have to be patient and cautious in a place like Puri. If a big fly is trapped in the web, the spider does not attack immediately. You have to have patience in addition to cunning. If you're too hasty, the quarry might flee.

Pears: Are you referring to Sundardas, by any chance? I've heard about him.

Bampton: No, I'm talking about the natives of Puri. A wily lot they are. Meanwhile I've gone and met the king of Puri and spoken to him about Jesus Christ and given him the tracts. A few temple priests too have stopped by to hear me preach. I have every hope and confidence that sooner rather than later I'll be able to baptise a few.

Pears: There hasn't exactly been a flood of conversions outside Puri either.

Sutton: There might not be many conversions here in Orissa, but it's unlike anywhere else in the country. Here the converts are all from the high castes, and they've taken to Christianity because they love and believe in Jesus Christ. Elsewhere it's the low-caste and uneducated people who have converted, mostly in the hope of bettering their lot or landing a job. Take our first convert Gangadhar. A blue-blooded Brahmin if there was one, and a pundit who's well-versed in the scriptures. He converted because he felt Christianity was the better religion. Another thing. None of the converts in Orissa have left the fold.

Pears: Now, that's really something.

Lacey: Yes, as Brother Sutton said, all our Oriya converts are from the higher castes, from the upper class. There are Brahmins and Karans, teachers and astrologers. Not one person became a Christian out of greed or because of other inducements. On the contrary, they've all suffered. Not only did they lose their old religion and caste, they lost their homes and lands, jobs and families as well.

Pears: But what's the problem with converting Sundardas?

Lacey: He simply hasn't been converted, but we're still hopeful. He doesn't worship idols, he believes in the Ten Commandments, he reads and appreciates the Gospels. Some of his close disciples have already converted. So it's really only a matter of time. Of course it will be our crowning glory when we get Sundardas to convert.

Pears: What problems do you face when you go out to preach?

Lacey: The biggest is the Company—its laws and its officers. The

Company pays money to the Jagannath temple; the pilgrim tax goes to temple maintenance. Naturally the Hindus keep raising the issue: if the Jagannath temple is nothing, why is the Company collecting a pilgrim tax and handing it over to the temple?

Bampton: Mind you, I keep telling them that the pilgrim tax is actually nothing but a fine for idol worship!

Sutton: The Company's magistrates are against us. They're angry with us because of our open criticism of the pilgrim tax. If it were abolished, they'd lose their jobs.

Bampton: They're hardly ever just, either. My servants tried to poison my wife, but the magistrate set them free.

Lacey: The Company laws and regulations are strange. If a male Hindu converts he forfeits his right to property and his Hindu wife can't be forced to live with him. All the converts here lost not only their homes and land but their families as well. So you can imagine the sacrifices people have made for the cause.

Sutton: That apart, the Company collectors and magistrates and commanders have all taken to a life of sin with their native mistresses. Deplorable characters, no wonder the natives equate Christianity with low morals.

Inside, Marua *vomits.* Pears *pricks up his ears.*

Lacey: *(Suddenly, unthinkingly.)* Virgin Mary. I mean our maid Mary. Rotten fish.

Pears *looks at him uncomprehendingly.*

Pears: *(Closing his notebook.)* Glad to have met you all. Could I see your chapel?

Lacey: It's three years old already. When it started in November 1826, there were only twelve members in the congregation. Now we have quite a number. Come along, let me show you around the chapel.

Pears: No, don't bother. My palanquin is just outside, and with your permission I'll take Brother Bampton along so we can discuss a few things on the way. But I'll visit you again before I go back to Calcutta.

Exit Pears *and* Bampton. *Enter* Sundardas *with a few disciples.*

Gangadhar *and* Radhu Das *prostrate themselves before him. Unthinkingly, both* Lacey *and* Sutton *do the same.* Sundardas *picks them up, and all shake hands.*

Sundardas: What a beautiful place. I've never been inside a sahib's home before.

Lacey: It's our good fortune to receive you. Please take a chair. *(To* Marua.) Mary, bring tea for Sadhu Sundardas.

Sundardas *sits down.* Marua *brings tea and biscuits.*

Sundardas: Marua—Mary. Mary—Marua. Nice name. (*To* Marua.) God bless you.

Lacey: Surely you don't have any objection to having tea in our home?

Sundardas: But I don't take any intoxicants.

Lacey: Tea is not an intoxicant.

Sundardas: No? Then why do you drink it? What are these other things?

Marua: Biskuts.

Sundardas: You mean poison cakes? (*He picks up one and examines it from all sides.)* If it's strictly vegetarian, I don't mind eating one. No, I don't have any objection to eating in a Firinghee home.

Lacey: Have no fear, these biscuits are completely vegetarian.

Sundardas: *(Munching one.)* It tastes good.

Sutton: You're an admirable person: you look down on idol worship, you believe in the Ten Commandments, you don't mind having food and water in our home.

Sundardas: But I'd mind becoming a Christian.

Lacey: Bur why? You don't believe in Hinduism!

Sundardas: That's not true. The fact is I don't reject any religion. I believe in all that is fair, just and true; it doesn't have anything to do with religion. I find your Ten Commandments admirable so I tell everyone to practice them.

Sutton: You have always spoken against the evil aspects of Hinduism.

Sundardas: What is bad is bad, no matter what the scriptures have to say. And when have I told people to practice all the tenets of Hinduism? My teachings are simple: speak the truth, lead a just life, et cetera. Hinduism might be full of abominable practices, but trying to convert others is not one of them. It does not denounce other religions as evil. I wonder what Gangadhar has gained by his conversion. *(Turns to* Gangadhar.) Well, Gangadhar, are you any better off? What are you able to do now that you couldn't when you were a Hindu?

Sutton: Gangadhar has a mind of his own. He didn't convert blindly.

Sundardas: What about Ramachandra and Krupasindhu?

Lacey: They weren't children; they weren't forced. They converted voluntarily.

Sundardas: And now this ignorant fool Radhu Das is all set to convert, if I'm not mistaken!

Lacey: Well, if that's what he wishes.

Sundardas: You've betrayed me. I gave you Gangadhar and Ramachandra to help you preach the Ten Commandments, but you went and converted them without even consulting me.

Lacey: We didn't force them to convert; they did so out of their own sweet will. They began to believe in Jesus Christ.

Sundardas: Gangadhar, do you believe in Jesus Christ?

Gangadhar: Yes.

Sundardas: And you believe everything that's written about him? In his miracles? Making the blind see, turning water to wine, stopping storms, bringing the dead back to life—you consider all these true?

Sutton: Of course these are all true! Every word written in the Holy Bible is true. How can there be any doubt? You too work miracles!

Sundardas: *(Laughs.)* Miracles! Miracles! All right, here's one for you.

He plucks a flower out of the air and hands it to Sutton. Sutton *is*

amazed. Sundardas *slowly takes out another flower from the folds of his shawl so that everyone can see. This flower he hands to* Lacey.

Sutton: Oh God!

Sundardas: Now let me tell you the purpose of my visit. You converted Kamali and her mother without their husbands' consent. That was highly unfair.

Marua *who has been listening silently all this time now comes forward.*

Marua: Baba, why is it highly unfair? You've always said men and women are equal. You don't practice discrimination between the sexes in your ashram. Why should a husband's consent be needed before a woman converts? Did Gangadhar and Ramachandra need their wives' consent? Ramachandra's wife was dead set against his conversion, I remember.

Sundardas: So you too want to convert, Marua?

Marua: You haven't answered my question, Baba.

Lacey: Mary, go inside. Be quiet when men are having a discussion.

Marua: When it comes to women, padres are just like other men. Women must always keep quiet. Hunh!

Exit Marua.

Sundardas: You converted Gangadhar, and I didn't say anything. You converted Ramachandra and I still kept quiet. Then you converted Krupasindhu, but I chose to ignore it. But the conversion of Kamali and Daani was the last straw. I decided to end my silence. What I came to tell you is that a lawsuit is being filed against you for converting these two illiterate, ignorant women without their husbands' consent. The case will come up before a white magistrate soon. Let's see how fair white man's justice is.

Sundardas *stands up.*

Sundardas: Goodbye. *(Turns to* Radhu Das.) Are you coming with me? Don't spend a minute longer here. All they're interested in is your conversion.

Radhu Das *does not budge.* Sutton *and* Lacey *look at each other in surprise. Exit* Sundardas.

Scene II

Lacey's *drawing room. Afternoon.* Marua *and* Balabhadra *are doing up the table.*

Marua: You know something, David? I think I'll convert, after all.

Balabhadra: What does it matter whether you do or don't. After all, you're just a maid servant in a house belonging to Christians. You live under their roof and share their food. You've been ostracised already, you've been thrown out of your caste.

Marua: How come these padres, who are always begging people to become Christians, have never asked me to convert?

Balabhadra: Look, you're a woman and a maid besides. Not exactly a prize catch, are you? What glory would there be for the padres if they got you to convert? Or take me. I've lost my caste, my home, my village. So why should they bother about me? But Mama, all this is to our advantage, if you ask me. We remain as much Hindu as Christian—call us by whatever name you please, thank you; it makes no difference to us.

Marua: Have you misplaced the forks? Not again!

Balabhadra: *(Looking for them.)* Oh, the damn forks! Now, now, where could I have put them? You know something, Mary? Let them crack their crazy heads over religion and conversion; to us what matters is laying the table, arranging the cutlery and stuff like that.

Marua: You couldn't be more right, David, my boy. Baba Sundardas or Padre Lacey—there's no difference.

Enter Lacey *and* Sutton.

Lacey: I knew the verdict would go against us. I've known it ever since the case came up in the court of the collector of the pilgrim tax.

Sutton: The only silver lining—if it can be called that—is that Sundardas got a chance to heap praise on English justice.

Lacey: English justice—ha! The husbands were allowed to strip every bit of jewellery off their wives in the open courtroom. The poor women had to give back their clothes too. The child was plucked from Kamali's breast and handed to the father. The husbands declared

their wives to be dead and that they'd observe the funeral rites for them. Is that English justice?

Sutton: How hard the magistrate tried to implicate us!

Lacey: Maybe he wasn't able to, but he did direct us to sign fifty rupee bonds ensuring that henceforth we would refrain from converting married women without their husbands' consent. And he ordered copies of his directive to be sent to all the missions and preachers.

Sutton: An unfair decision, a most unfair decision. I'm going to petition to the governor general against it. *(Pauses thoughtfully.)* But what good will that do? We've already written to the governor general several times about the Jagannath temple. The other day Gangadhar signed and sent a petition that all monetary support to the temple must stop immediately, but as usual there's been no reply. I don't suppose there will be one.

Lacey: This verdict will hit us hard. We've already lost some of the natives' esteem; their respect for us has taken a beating.

Sutton: The worst thing is that they no longer fear us at all. If a Hindu holy man can drag us into the court and get us fined, won't that lead them to increase their efforts to disrupt our meetings and preaching?

Lacey: The Calcutta Herald has asked us for information on the case.

Sutton: We'll send them a complete report, showing out how the Company's laws and officials are ranged against the missionaries.

Lacey: Brother Bampton had sent word that he would be present in the courtroom when the verdict was rendered, but he wasn't there. It would have been useful to discuss the case with him.

Sutton: Brother Bampton is very sick; I wonder if he'll ever be able to leave Puri again.

Lacey: He should go back to England, for his own health; but he won't even think of it.

Sutton: As long as his greatest desire remains unfulfilled, to make a Christian out of at least one native of Puri.

Lacey: God willing he might yet succeed.

Sutton: What does it matter if he hasn't been able to convert a single Hindu, his achievements are truly impressive. It was he who stood in front of the Great Temple and preached to the priests; it was he who entered the pagoda at Konark and spread the word of Christ. Really, it took someone like Brother Bampton to stick it out in Puri against overwhelming odds.

Lacey: Puri is indeed our testing ground.

Sutton: I know, I know. My Charlotte died within a month of arriving there. Whenever I visit her grave I cannot help but curse that place as the vilest on earth.

Lacey: On a sad occasion like today I'm reminded of the day I left Serampore for Orissa. Dr. Carey said to me: Brother Lacey, I can't pray for you in the open congregation, but I will give you three pieces of advice. One, it is your duty to preach the Gospel of our Lord; two, God has said His words will come true; and three, He will remove all obstacles when He deems fit.

Sutton: Praise to the Lord.

From outside the sounds of a palanquin being lowered to the ground. Enter an ailing Bampton, *barely able to walk. He makes for the nearest chair and sinks onto it, catching his breath.*

Lacey: Brother Bampton, we had given up hope.

Bampton: *(With considerable difficulty.)* Sorry, I couldn't make it to the courtroom.

Sutton: Have you heard the verdict?

Bampton: Yes, but I'm not disheartened. We'll have to persevere despite disappointments, obstacles and enemies.

Lacey: Brother Bampton, you're an extraordinary person.

Bampton: I once thought so myself, but I began to cave in when I contracted tuberculosis three years ago. My health went to pieces. I went to Calcutta for a change of air, but that did little good. I even took long spells by the sea, but nothing helped. I'm only forty-three, but I feel like an old man of eighty or more. I used to love riding, but now I find it a torture. The palanquin is about the only form of

transportation I can stand. It drains me so much to stand that I'm forced to sit on a chair when I preach. Still, none of this matters, and happily shall I go to our Lord when the call comes. The only thing which saddens me is what will become of the poor native heathens of Orissa!

Enter Gangadhar *and* Radhu Das. *After exchanging greetings, they take their seats.*

Lacey: Gangadhar, have you heard the verdict?

Gangadhar: Yes.

Radhu Das: That seems to be the only topic of discussion in the town.

Gangadhar: Did Sundara Baba come to see you?

Sutton: Have you been to his ashram?

Gangadhar: I was there a few days ago. Sundara Baba said he'd come to Cuttack to meet you the day the Court rendered its judgement.

Lacey: What else did he say?

Gangadhar: He abused and threatened me, much the same way as he abused and threatened Ramachandra and Krupasindhu after their conversion. Sundara Baba has changed a lot.

Radhu Das: People are talking against him.

Lacey: What!

Gangadhar: They're saying that Sundara Baba is sinning with his women disciples, that he's secretly indulging in idol worship.

Sutton: To tell you frankly, I've never really been able to trust a Hindu holy man. No Hindu holy man is up to any good. In my book of grammar there's an example which I think fits a Hindu holy man to a T:

Ignorant and foolish as a rule
Pretending to be holy out of greed;
To amass wealth
He roams the countryside
For more and more disciples;
Shorn of wisdom and piety

But acting as high and mighty;

He's a cheat, a turncoat, a bandit,

A fake, a sham, a dacoit;

He lives by his wiles;

Holy ashes, loin clothes, matted hair

Sleight of hand tricks passed off as miracles.

Sundara Baba is one such holy man; no better than the other charlatans.

Gangadhar: I think he has gone mad.

Lacey: Not mad, but bad. How dare he file a suit against us, drag us to Court and have us fined!

Sutton: We should have no relations with him. Gangadhar, stop visiting his ashram.

Enter Sundardas *with a few disciples.*

Sundardas: I beg your pardon for arriving without an invitation.

Lacey: *(Angrily.)* Just why are you here? We want nothing to do with you.

Sundardas: Calm down, Brother Lacey, calm down. *(Turns to his disciples.)* Sit down, children. *(The disciples make themselves comfortable on the floor.)* All the padres are present—William Bampton, Charles Lacey, Amos Sutton, Gangadhar Sarangi. And the convert Radhu Das as well. Good. Good. I might as well say what I came to say.

Lacey: We want nothing to do with you any more.

Sundardas: Patience, Brother Lacey, patience. Give me a hearing first. I'm going to tell you about Jesus Christ the Saviour. Jesus himself was like a child. And you know what he said about children, don't you? Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God. A child like this was Krishna. They are the same—Krishna and Jesus Christ. One and the same.

Bampton: *(Angry, excited.)* Blasphemy!

Sundardas: *(Brushing him aside.)* Let me explain. Krishna was born in the Jadu community; Jesus was born a Jew. Both were born into families that tended animals; both had to be shielded from royal vengeance; both Mary and Devaki had immaculate conceptions;

Krishna was smuggled away to Gopapur for fear of Kamsa, Jesus to Syria for fear of Herod. Both Kamsa and Herod were notorious for infanticide. Both Krishna and Jesus were long-armed, with glowing complexions. With a single grain of food Krishna once fed twelve thousand Brahmins in the Kamyak forest; Jesus fed five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fishes. Christ walked on water, Krishna underneath it. Krishna turned stone to butter, Christ turned water to wine. Each was hailed as god. Both straightened the humps of hump-backs. Krishna had twelve cowherd friends, Christ twelve apostles.

Sutton: What nonsense! The Bible says: Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.

Lacey: Then if any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is Christ, or there; believe it not. For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect.

Bampton: *(Rising to his feet with difficulty.)* Sundardas is guilty of blasphemy.

Sundardas: Padre Bampton, you are a sick man. I will heal you with a miracle. Jesus Christ gave sight to the blind, speech to the mute, hearing to the deaf and life to the dead.

Bampton: In your Hindu religion the gods and goddesses killed, but our Jesus Christ brought the dead back to life.

Sundardas: Good, good. I too will bring new life to the people. In Kaliyug I'm Jesus Christ. The gospel is what I preach. I have twelve disciples. *(Counts on his fingers.)* Daitari Nayak, Ganga Mohanty, Krupasindhu Sahu, Sudarshan Rout, Parameswar Malla, Purushottam Mohapatra, Bamdev Sahu, Parsuram Rout, Hari Padhi, Ramachandra Jachak, Gangadhar Sarangi. That makes eleven. *(He walks up to* Radhu Das *and fondles his chin.)* And Radhu Das, my Judas Iscariot.

Bampton: *(jumping about.)* Blasphemy! Blasphemy! *(Recites to himself)* And as he sat upon the mount of Olives, the disciples came

unto him privately, saying, Tell us, when shall these things be? And what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world? And Jesus answered and said unto them, Take heed that no man deceive you. For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many. *(Pause.)* Sundardas is a false prophet. He is trying to pull the wool over your eyes.

Sundardas: *(Brushing him aside.)* Did you understand what I said, my children? I am Krishna, I am Jesus Christ.

Lacey: Please leave now.

Sundardas: *(Rattles off like a madman.)* I will, but I'll take my disciples with me. No, on second thought, let them remain here to preach my Commandments, the Commandments of Jesus Christ. I'll only take my old servant Radhu Das with me.

Lacey: If you don't leave, you'll be thrown out.

Sundardas: I'll take Radhu Das with me.

Radhu Das: But I don't want to go with you.

Sundardas: What? What did you say, Radhu Das? You've become smart, I see! Don't you know Sundardas, Radhu Judas Iscariot Das? Of course you'll come with me. If not today, then some other day, but come you will. And if I ever hear that you've become a Christian, I'll give you a bone-breaking beating, much worse than what you got at the hands of the villagers of Bhairavpur. Better keep that in mind. *(Looks around.)* All right, my children. Let's go. Goodbye, Padre Lacey, goodbye Padre Sutton. *(Walks up to* Bampton.) Goodbye Padre Bampton.

Exit Sundardas *with his disciples. Silence.*

Lacey: We should file a police complaint.

Sutton: Patience, Brother Lacey, there's no point in getting worked up. We must be watchful, Sundardas is our enemy now. He has openly insulted us. True, we must do something about it, but we must be careful.

Bampton: *(Getting up in agitation.)* Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.

Bampton *crashes to the floor. The others rush to pick him up.*

Sutton: Brother Bampton!

Lacey: Brother Bampton!

Scene III

Same as the last scene: Lacey's *drawing room. Morning.* Sutton *and* Lacey *are seated. Behind them,* Ann, Maruá *and* Balabhadra *are busy laying the table.*

Lacey: Already two more years have gone by. How quickly time passes. Nine years already since I came to Orissa.

Sutton: Sometimes I feel gratified about our achievement, while at other times I'm racked by a sense of failure.

Lacey: When I left England, my friends told me I was a fool if I thought I would convert even a single soul in Orissa. They were sure no worshipper of Jagannath would ever take to Christianity. But my faith in my mission remained unshaken; I knew I'd succeed someday. And it's only six years since we started our Mission here and already our efforts have borne fruit. And what a catch to start with—a self-respecting, blue-blooded Brahmin, well-versed in the scriptures!

Sutton: Gangadhar is a big support to us. He lost his home, his land and family by becoming a Christian.

Lacey: Thank God we were able to buy that land next to the chapel. Now we can build him a house.

Sutton: I never thought that piece of land would be ours. But right from the beginning Radhu Das was confident that the owner could be persuaded to sell it.

Lacey: I'm sure he'd have sold the Hanuman idol for a price too. We could have had it broken into pieces publicly so that people would have realised that stones have no supernatural powers. *(Pause.)* But Brother Sutton, why do you sometimes feel that we've achieved nothing in Orissa?

Sutton: When I first came here I had grandiose hopes that the entire population would convert in no time. But what have we accomplished? We've converted only a handful. We've built a chapel

on the ruins of a temple. We've fallen so short of our dreams! The dreams of an Orissa with all its beautiful Hindu temples razed to the ground! The Jagannath Temple at Puri continues to reign over the land; the Hindus have not given up idol worship, or the caste system. We still visit fairs and bazaars and preach our mouths dry, but Brother Lacey, to what avail?

Lacey: Brother Sutton, you give in to despair too easily. Take your own example. You compiled and published an Oriya Grammar the first of its kind in the language. Just think what a help it is to the learners, and to the language itself.

Sutton: Are you under the illusion that the Oriya language is—or ever was—in need of my grammar book, Brother Lacey? I worked on the book because I thought it would help us missionaries. If you take a dispassionate view, what have we really done here other than preach?

Lacey: But the rest is the Company's business.

Sutton: The Company's business! Does it have any aim other than making money? It did not hesitate to come to an understanding with the priests of Jagannath temple simply to reduce its administrative problems.

Enter the Villagers. *They look at the padres who nod genially at them.*

Lacey: Welcome! Welcome!

Villager I: We were passing by and thought of looking up the old padre who used to come to our village to preach, the one who used to ride a horse. We haven't seen him around for a long time.

Sutton: That's Brother Bampton, he passed away two years ago. May his soul rest in peace.

Villager II: Dead? He was a good man, the old padre was. Never harmed anyone, not even a fly; never lost his temper, no matter how much he was ridiculed.

Lacey: Brother Sutton here and I are padres like the late lamented Brother Bampton. Please sit down. I will give you copies of the Book and explain the message of our Lord Jesus Christ to you.

Villager III: We don't need your books and printed papers; we

just wanted to look up the lovable old padre. We want nothing to do with Christians.

Villager I: Did the old padre have a family?

Lacey: A wife and two sons. They went back to England after his death.

Sutton: Brother Bampton was laid to rest at Puri; you can visit his grave if you wish.

Villager I: What an idea! We can't even make it to Puri to worship our own Lord Jagannath. Visit padre Bampton's grave indeed! He was a nice soul though.

Exit the Villagers, *talking among themselves.*

Sutton: For as long as I lived in Puri after Brother Bampton's death I never forgot to put some flowers on his grave every time I visited Charlotte's.

Lacey: Brother Bampton was dear to God and He took him back early. Jesus must have complimented him: Well done, my good and faithful servant! Bampton must have run into Charlotte in heaven.

Sutton: Such a wonderful man, but what an awful time he had at the end. He was completely mad. The day he died he recited from the Bible: O Lord, rebuke me not in thy wrath: neither chasten me in thy hot displeasure. Foe thine arrows stick fast in me, and thy hand presseth me sore.

Lacey: One regret I will always have is that I didn't see him before he died. It wasn't Sister Bampton's fault, she sent word in time but I started out late. By the time I reached Puri his body had already been nailed inside the coffin. He was buried next to Charlotte.

Sutton: The doctor at Puri told me about Brother Bampton's last moments. It seems a nurse asked him: 'How do you feel?' and Brother Bampton replied: 'Wonderful, I'm on my way to heaven.' Sister Bampton was holding his head in her lap and she whispered into his ear: 'Yes, my dear, you're going to heaven.' 'That's right,' murmured Bampton. Those were his last words.

Lacey: Who knows what he was thinking about in those last moments! I remember it like yesterday the first time I met him in Puri.

Always eager to jump on his horse and gallop off to preach. Perhaps his last thoughts were: Bring me my horse, I'm on my way to heaven!

Sutton: We've lost many friends in Orissa—Brother Pegg's three young daughters, my wife and five-month-old son, Brother Joshua Cropper and Brother Bampton. And think of the misfortunes that have visited the land in the meantime—first the floods in Balasore, and then the Great Famine, which ravaged the entire land. We had to close down the Mission in Puri on two occasions. This time it has fallen to my lot to do so yet again.

Lacey: I'm sure you will soon regain your health and return to Puri.

Sutton: Who knows! I'm not so hopeful. My health seems to worsen by the day. I think I need a long break; perhaps I'll go to the Americas for a spell. Who knows when I'll return!

Lacey: Brother Sutton, you'll be all right soon. We owe Orissa a lot, and there's a lot more to do here.

Sutton: What more can we do? Maybe convert a few more people, that's about all.

Lacey: We were betrayed by the person we had hoped would become the first Christian of the land.

Sutton: So what if Sundardas has not become a Christian? Look at all his disciples and devotees—Gangadhar Sarangi, Ramachandra Jachak, Krupasindhu Sahu, Kamali and Daani, Daitari Nayak, Karuna Sahu, Kishu Padhy, Hari Padhy, Trilochan, Bamdev, Balaram and all. They've all become Christians.

Lacey: You're forgetting Radhu Das.

Sutton: Right. But what a pity that Sundardas, whom we expected to help us preach and proselytize, has become our greatest enemy and obstacle!

Lacey: He's become a false messiah; he's gone mad.

Sutton: Sometimes I wonder whether we drove him mad. His madness seemed to become complete after we converted Radhu Das.

Lacey: He roughed up Radhu Das.

Sutton: We filed a case against him and had him sent to jail. Earlier, he had won his case and had us sign a bond. Now we're even.

Lacey: The verdict was fair. Sundardas himself was full of praise for it.

Sutton: Last time we denounced the same magistrate because his verdict was against us. This time we were pleased with him because it was in our favour.

Lacey: Nevertheless, Sundardas wasn't right to beat up Radhu Das. Radhu converted voluntarily; nobody forced him.

Sutton: Sometimes I wonder what the poor converts have gotten in life? By becoming Christians they simply traded this life for an afterlife; they lost everything here on earth.

Lacey: What are you saying, Brother Sutton? We saved lost souls; we saved sinners.

Sutton: They lost their homes, their families broke up—husbands were separated from wives, children from parents. Villages went up in flames; discord and strife became the ruling passions; peace was destroyed. Wouldn't they have been better off without us?

Lacey: Brother Sutton, you need to rest; you aren't well.

Sutton: Brother Lacey, I'm fine. Please don't worry about me.

Lacey: It's not as if we've confined ourselves only to preaching and proselytizing. We've done a good deal for these people—set up schools and hospitals, controlled epidemics. We've put an end to many an evil practice in the Jagannath temple; we've put an end to human sacrifices by the hill people.

Sutton: What would have happened if we hadn't come here?

Lacey: The natives would have remained sunk in the mire of sin, ignorance and darkness.

Sutton: Are they pleased that we're here?

Lacey: Why not? *(He calls out to* Marua *and others.)* Mary, David, Radhu Das. Come here please. *(They approach him.)* What do you have to say about it? Are you people pleased? Mary, you were ostracized by your people in the village and they looked down upon you, but here

you got a chance for a decent life—good clothes, good food. And you David, you were born in a little hell-hole. Your father sold you to the Kondhs, who wanted to sacrifice you, but here you are looked after and given an education too. You Radhu Das, you ran after false saints like Sundardas and others for years, wanting but not getting the enlightenment you sought, and which you found here. What do you have to say, Mary, David and Radhu Das?'Aren't I right?

They nod their heads in agreement.

Sutton: Answer me, Marua, Balabhadra and Radhu Das: is this the life you wanted? Have you found peace and happiness?

They remain silent. Enter Sundardas. *Everyone is amazed.* Sundardas *has an unruly beard. He is glum, no longer his smiling, sprite self. He proceeds to shake hands with everyone.*

Sundardas: Are you surprised to see me?

Lacey: We certainly didn't expect you.

Sutton: Please take a chair. You're welcome here.

Sundardas: *(Takes a chair.)* I got out of the jail this morning. They let me out a little earlier for good behaviour. I thought I would come and thank you before I returned to Kujibar.

Lacey: Thank us?

Sundardas: For having me sent to jail.

Lacey: It was Radhu Das who filed the case against you. You assaulted him.

Sundardas: You know nothing about my relationship with Radhu Das, then. He was used to being roughed up once in a while, and he didn't mind it. No, padre, the case was not between him and me. Remember Kamali and Daani? Their case wasn't filed by me but by their husbands, though the war was actually between you and me. We fought it through them; they were mere pawns. Radhu Das wasn't my opponent, nor were the husbands of Kamali and Daani yours. The opponents were you and I.

Lacey: But you put obstacles in our path; you fell out with your disciples when they embraced Christianity. You made yourself our opponent.

Sundardas: But there was a time when you looked upon me as a friend, remember? You complimented me, congratulated me when I preached your Ten Commandments. But when ...

Lacey: *(Interrupting him.)* You pretended to be Jesus Christ.

Sutton: Brother Lacey, let him speak.

Sundardas: Brother Sutton, there's a reason why I want to thank him for the jail term. People normally consider the faraway Himalayas or an ashram inside the deepest forest as the ideal place for meditation and reflection, but I think prison is just as good a place, if not better. Not only are you alone, but your ego, your inflated notions about yourself, take a battering. And that is the first step toward true meditation.

Sundardas *falls silent, immersed in his thoughts.*

Sutton: You were telling us about your prison experience.

Sundardas: Oh yes, I was telling you about what I came to realize. I had all the time in the world to contemplate: who I am, what I want, what I have become? When I was the commander of the Athgarh army I was equally happy—I loved big game hunting, for one thing—but one day I decided to change the course of my life.

Sutton: That's because you wanted a better life.

Sundardas: I don't know what I wanted, I really don't. What made me want to change was the sudden realisation that the life I had lived until then was all wrong, a big mistake; that all I had achieved or done was insignificant, meaningless. *(Pause.)* I began to analyse my past and wanted my future to be different. That's how I began to study the scriptures, discuss them with monks and sadhus before I shut myself in Kujibar ashram to meditate. The long meditation led me to certain ideas about life, society, ethics and morality.

Sutton: The Kujibar ashram was your creation.

Sundardas: I had no thought of establishing an ashram. But so deep is people's respect for sadhus and sanyasis that they build an ashram wherever these monks stop even for a while. So before I knew what was happening I found an ashram built and some people

declaring themselves to be my disciples. Lo and behold, overnight I came to be known as Sundara Baba.

Lacey: Hindu society is teeming with false saints and sadhus; many ashrams are dens of iniquity.

Sundardas: Other religions have had their fair share of such creatures and institutions too. Name one for which wars haven't been fought, and which hasn't sown the seeds of discord and strife? Anyway, I wasn't telling about that, just about my experience.

Sutton: Please go on. You were saying that one day you decided to change your life.

Sundardas: I came to understand what constitutes an ideal life. But was it easy to practice? Society makes many demands. I wanted a simple life as ordinary Sundardas, but I was saddled with being Sadhu Sundardas. From a seeker, a trier, I became a realised soul, a sadhu, and the head of an ashram on top of all that. There was no longer any possibility of living life on my own terms. And I found the life heading an ashram no less stifling than life as an army commander. The moment you cease to live life according to your own notions, and try to live up to other people's expectations, life becomes painful. Once I was identified as a Baba and tied to an ashram, the place began to bustle with visitors and I began to give speeches, to start teaching, and preaching. Some welcomed it, many denounced it; some became disciples. I began to make efforts to get more and more people to turn to my teachings.

Sutton: There's nothing wrong in preaching universal, eternal values.

Sundardas: A truly realised soul should be more concerned with living a good life himself. But I was taken up with my increasing desire to propagate my views and gain more and more followers. Practices like idol worship and the caste system run so deep in our society that it wasn't possible for me to demolish them. When my persuasion, my reasoning and arguments all failed, I took to working miracles to instil fear and faith into people's minds. A man who will believe that a flower can be plucked out of air will swallow anything.

Lacey: Saints can work miracles.

Sundardas: My disciples deified me as a miracle-working saint. Krupasindhu and his wife Devaki had lost many children, but after they joined the ashram not one but three of their children survived; all that was attributed to my powers. But when one of Kamali's children died it was not held against me. I was covered by the cloak of false sainthood.

Sutton: But your teachings were sound.

Sundardas: One must practice what one teaches. For example, I preached against anger but on many an occasion I couldn't curb my own.

Sutton: No man is perfect; everyone has some weakness.

Sundardas: It's not just a matter of weakness. Far from it. I think I never believed in what I professed. Marua hit the nail on the head when she accused me of discriminating between men and women. In my ashram I always claimed to consider men and women as equals, but I couldn't bring myself to treat Gangadhar's conversion without his wife's consent the same as Kamali's without her husband's. In fact, there was no difference between the two. This morning when I got out of jail, I found a few disciples waiting. They thought I'd start preaching again. But I thought no, I must first practise what I wish to preach. So I avoided them and came here to see you.

Sundardas *falls silent as if he has nothing else to add.*

Sutton: You were telling us about your relationship with us.

Sundardas: Oh yes; I became acquainted with your scriptures much before I met any of you. The first book I came across was the Ten Commandments. Until then I didn't know about the Bible or Jesus Christ. I took to the Commandments immediately—not because they came directly from your god or because they were a part of your Holy Bible but because they seemed to me the basic tenets, the essence of all religion. Later when I read about Jesus Christ I began to grow to love and respect him.

Lacey: But you turned against us!

Sundardas: You did not ask me to preach the Ten Commandments; I did that on my own. You did not ask me for my disciples; I gave them to you. But you misunderstood.

Lacey: We wanted you to convert, to accept our faith.

Sundardas: You wanted me to become a Christian. But why should I give up my religion and embrace yours? Nothing prevents me from practising or preaching what I think is right. Nothing is imposed on me. I didn't believe in idol worship or in many other Hindu rituals, or in the caste system. The priests and the Brahmins hated the sight of me, but that didn't matter. I preached only to those who would come to me. People were free to accept or reject my teachings. The trouble started when I sent my disciples out to preach your Ten Commandments.

Sutton: But don't you think the Ten Commandments should be widely preached? Don't they represent the true religion?

Sundardas: Human life is more important than religion. If missionary activity creates dissension, what's the use of it?

Sutton: Every religion wants to increase the number of believers.

Sundardas: I had enough time in the jail to think about all that. Anything that complicates the human situation can't be true faith. Faith is personal; and every man should preserve it within his heart, his home. Those are the true places of worship—those are his temples, his mosques, his churches. Once you put it out in the open, in the bazaar, on the street, in the court room, there'll be nothing but bad blood, strife and division.

Silence.

Sundardas: I'm sorry I've been doing all the talking. Tell me about yourselves, Brother Lacey, Brother Sutton.

Sutton: I will be leaving Orissa shortly.

Sundardas: That's a sensible decision, Brother Sutton. You look ill, and need a change of air. God bless you and keep you well.

Lacey: Will you have some tea?

Sundardas: *(Rising to his feet.)* No, thank you. Some other time perhaps. *(shakes hand with them.)*

God bless you all. Now, my children, Radhu there, and you Marua and Balabhadra, how long do you want to live as exiles? Come along, come home with me.

Exit Sundardas.

After a moment of hesitation Radhu, Marua and Balabhadra *follow. A tired* Lacey *helps* Sutton *to a chair and flops down into another.*

Director's Note

H S Shivaprakash

Once when I was visiting my friend Thomas in his Sahitya Akademi office, I found a book lying on his table. It was *Sundardas* the English translation of an Oriya play by our mutual friend JP Das. I asked Thomas to let me review the book. He readily agreed. Though I had known JP as a poet and friend, I had not read any of his plays. I was very curious about his play-writing. When I read it in the next couple of days, I was deeply impressed by the theme of the play though I found the narrative more novelistic than theatrical. My review of the play was later published in *Indian Literature*, which the author liked very much.

The protagonist of the play went on haunting me for months to follow. When something fascinates us, we tend to find a good reason. But fascination with people, things and books emerges from a plane far deeper than what reason can tell us.

I was probably impressed by the book for several reasons. It tells the story of a saint whose integrity was so strong that no religious structure could hold him for long. Further, the book gives human depiction of some of the most committed British Christian missionaries. They had to struggle with local religious faiths as well as East India company, which was more interested in making the fast buck than saving souls.

I also found the depiction of the saint Sundardas very gripping. Sundardas is not shown in the play as a perfect man. His saintliness is always 'becoming.' As the play reaches its conclusion he has grown

from a self-assured moralist into a real Christ-figure forgiving himself and forgiving all. His suffering and humiliation becomes the fuel of his growth.

In one of my meetings with JP, I learnt that this intriguing play had never been staged. He had some hopes of getting it directed by a theatre stalwart from National School of Drama. But the latter had declared the play unfit for stage. I was irritated on hearing this. I remembered how a couple of my plays had been rejected by stage people for the same reason only to be made into great stage successes decades after they were written. Further, I was enthused at the successes two stage productions I had done for the first time so late in life. I promised JP then and there that I will make it a success on stage.

I asked him to get me some English-speaking Odia actors from Delhi and to find a sponsor. We also needed a rehearsal space. We were not successful in finding any one of them.

I then passed on the book to Mr Shahid Anwar for whose troupe Bahroop I had done a successful production of Brecht's *Galileo* in Urdu. Having read the play, he also declared it unfit for staging.

In spite of all these discouraging responses, the conviction grew in me that it was fit for stage. I wanted to challenge all critics of the play's stage-worthiness.

The auspicious moment came when I decided to do this play as a class-room production for my course on tragedy in the modern world. I started reading and discussing the play with my students, some of whom were extremely talented in different aspects of theatre. However, the student response was very discouraging. They all warned me that it can never work on stage. But I demurred. I insisted. I persisted. My conviction was far too deep to be given up.

I knew that the text would not work as it was. Its theatrical essence had to be excavated from its fictional framework. This meant a lot of intelligent editing. I discussed this with the author. He was kind enough to give me full freedom to do what I liked with the test. I then began to see and feel the hidden musical structure in the apparently prose work of historical fiction of the book. I broke up the play into a sequence of three musical parts. And then I needed songs

to connect these phases. I requested the author to write three songs which I wanted to be in Odia though the rest of the play was going to be in English. But for some reason JP did not give me the songs. So I decided to write the songs in Kannada and get them translated by my dear friend Sumanyu into Oriya. It worked. They were set to wonderful music by my student Ankush who is a musical wizard. I had excellent singers in Jyoti and Vibuti.

I now felt the need of getting some dance into the play as I further wanted to rid the play of its realistic narrative structure. Some of my students were excellent dancers who introduced a lot of dance movements.

The next task was casting. I cast my student Bineel who had made a very good job of the main role in my previous production *Galileo.* Gaurav was another acting talent good at comical roles. I made him the Brahmin priest. Though most of the characters in the play were male, my actors were predominantly girls. So I had to cast majority of girls into male roles. At first it looked odd. But as the rehearsal progressed girls transformed into male characters. Amita, Kavita, Preema and Indrani—all of them metamorphosed into powerful male roles.

I was completely untrained in dance, music or theatre. I had now taken upon myself the daunting tasks putting them together into a seamless whole. I had learnt one great lesson form my dear departed friend CG Krishnaswami, who first put up my plays on stage. He too was untrained like me. Still he grew up into a giant of Kannada theatre. He often used to tell his actors: 'Work with animal instinct.' I have always followed this principle, putting aside the shallow protests of muddling intellect.

The greatest challenge was to find a good ending for the play. I did not want the realistic ending in the text. I got a vision of Sundardas turning into a bird at the end and flying to the skies followed by his disciples. I could work this scene beautifully with the help of my students. But then I thought that not all of them should fly away. Someone should stay back in the world to tell the posterity of the rare unknown and unsung saint. So I made his maid servant who was also

his disciple stay back, a lamp in hand. The visual poetry of the concluding scene enthralled the spectators.

I had chosen to do the play outdoors in the midst of a clump of trees adjacent to our school. I blocked scenes in such a way that trees became part of choreography. The fact that we did not get lights for the show turned out to be a blessing in disguise. We resorted to doing the play in flood lights. The modesty of lighting emphasized the pristine simplicity of the theme.

The author was delighted about the production though I had edited the text mercilessly into a third of its length. My students Ananya and Shruti contributed a lot to the editing part. Nearly three hundred students, teachers and theatre audiences found the production deeply impressive. My students were very happy because they had never expected the play to be such a resounding success.

The only bad part was that it was a course production and could not be repeated. Students who had taken part dispersed after the semester. Still, we succeeded in doing another show on the lawns of IGNCA where we had a bigger audience. One of the distinguished spectators that evening was Prof Paula Richman, a great living expert on Ramayana performances. She said: 'This is one of the best productions I have seen in India.'

The students who worked very hard for this production still remember it nostalgically. So do I.

I have promised JP that if I get an opportunity, I would like to go to Odisha and work with Odia actors and do a totally different production. I have not found the time to do it. I also have offers to produce it in Kannada.

Someday I will go back and re-do it. My first production has not exhausted the theatrical potential of the character of Sundardas.

Our production was done with a shoe-string budget. But we had enormous human resources of my students which more than compensated this lack. Apart from our efforts, I ascribe the success of our production to the author who created a character filled with *karunarasa*.

Did not Bhavabhuti claim: *'Eko eva ras karuna'*?

Made for Each Other

Picture overleaf

J.P. Das, Anant Mahapatra and others
Jane Janaka Paain (in Odia)
Cuttack, 1971



Made for Each Other and Miss X

Introduction

Vishnu Prabhakar

Dr Jagannath Prasad Das is a well known Odia playwright. This collection of his two translated one-act plays Achanak (Miss X) and Ek Dusre Ke Liye (Made For Each Other) is a living example of his art of creating dramatic situations. Coincidently the subject of both these plays is 'marriage' and it is not without reason. The main streams of thoughts in literature today pertain to woman, and the woman who is intricately linked to marriage. That the institution of marriage today has become such vexatious is also an established fact. The questions that arise are--when should the marriage take place? Who is responsible for selecting the spouse, whether it lies with parents or with the boy and girl? Similarly issues such as love marriage and dowry continue to haunt us. The playwright seeks to draw our attention to these burning issues and paradoxes through these two plays.

The playwright has not attempted to draw out conclusions based on principled debates between differing points of view. Rather he has used humour and satire to highlight these paradoxes and the futility of these issues. He knows human psychology and very subtly creates situations in such a way that all characters appear in their true selves such as the two elders in Achanak (Miss X) who despite their age spend time looking at the matrimonial columns in newspapers. Initially they appear to be opposed to the dowry system, though they end up competing in raising the stakes to give a higher dowry for their respective daughters. But their would-be-groom eventually marries

someone else and the two gentlemen are left high and dry. Though Achanak is actually the name of a racehorse, the playwright has used it as a pun to imply that marriage is also like a gamble.

The other play, Ek Dusre Ke Liye (Made For Each Other) is also based on the problems with the institution of marriage. On the face of it, the parents of both the boy and the girl give them apparent independence to choose their respective spouses, but in reality they want both of them to enter into arranged matrimony. But the boy and the girl, for reasons known to them, do not wish to marry each other. On the other hand, they also do not wish to make their parents angry either. Therefore, they pretend to be what they are not so as to be able to thwart the attempts of their parents. And this way, they are finally able to extricate themselves from the web woven by their parents.

Both these plays can be staged successfully. They are entertaining and equally successful in attracting attention to the issues being raised.

Made for Each Other

Cast: Devdutt, Prof. Sharma, Mrs. Sharma, Judge Sahib, Pratibha

Scene I

(A small sitting room. Professor and Mrs Sharma seem to be waiting for someone. The Professor is reading a magazine and his wife is busy knitting. Both are silent and Devdutt is pacing the. room impatiently. He goes to the chair in front of his parents and tries to attract their attention. But the Professor continues to read and his wife keeps knitting. Finally Devdutt takes courage to speak up.)

Devdutt: I repeat I do not believe in this arrangement.

(The Professor and his wife look at Devdutt disapprovingly.)

Prof: Count up to fifteen, again.

(Devdutt counts one to fifteen. The Professor returns to his magazine and Mrs Sharma to her knitting. Devdutt starts pacing the room again. A car stops outside. The Professor looks at his watch.)

Prof: I think the Judge Sahib has arrived. Go and find out, Devdutt.

(Devdutt goes out and returns.)

Devdutt: No, he has not come *(in the same breath)* and I do not believe in this arrangement.

Prof: But I do.

Mrs Sharma: And I do too.

Prof: What objection can there be to this arrangement? It is after all your marriage, and I want you to see the girl and approve of her. That is why I requested Judge Sahib to come here with his daughter. See her, talk to her, and if you agree, who are we to object?

Mrs Sharma: That's right. Who are we?

(Another car stops. The Professor looks at Devdutt, who goes out and soon returns.)

Prof: *(sternly)* Devdutt...

(Devdutt starts counting one to fifteen.)

Prof: *(looks at his watch)* It's five now and the Judge Sahib should be here any minute.

(Judge Sahib enters followed by his daughter)

Judge: Look, I arrived exactly at five, for I am a firm believer in punctuality.

(The Professor and his wife greet them and request them to be seated. judge Sahib keeps standing)

Judge: No, I cannot stay on now. I have an appointment with the Chief Justice at five minutes past five and I am a firm believer in punctuality. Let my daughter remain. The car will pick her up. And tomorrow, Devdutt, come and have dinner with us. At eight. On the dot.

(Judge Sahib goes out repeating to himself that he is a firm believer in punctuality. Now they all look at the girl. She is still standing in a corner and gazing at them foolishly.)

Prof: Sit down, young girl.

Mrs Sharma: Please sit down.

(She apparently does not hear them.)

Girl: Did you say something?

Prof: *(in a loud voice)* Please sit down.

Mrs Sharma: *(louder still)* Sit down.

(She hears them this time and goes towards the sofa, but stumbles against a centre table. She manages to sit down.)

Prof: Sit down. Devdutt. *(To the girl)* This is our son Devdutt.

(The girl does not hear him.)

Mrs Sharma: *(loudly)* This is our son Devdutt.

(She hears her and instead of greeting Devdutt, greets the Professor.)

Prof: Devdutt is sitting that side. *(Loudly)* What is your name?

Girl: Tibha.

Prof: Tibha? That's a strange name.

(The girl gets up and looks for something on the floor. Everyone looks at her in surprise.)

Girl: My glasses. I think they fell off when I stumbled. Please help me find them.

(The Professor and his wife begin searching for her spectacles.)

Prof: I cannot find any glasses here.

Mrs Sharma: There are no glasses here.

Devdutt: That is because she was not wearing any glasses when she came.

Prof: Now that you mention it, that is true.

Mrs Sharma: Yes, that is right.

Prof: Don't worry. You have perhaps left your glasses at home. What are you studying?

(The girl does not respond and so the Professor repeats the question in a louder tone.)

Girl: *(almost shouts back)* In the first year. For the last two years. But what about my glasses? Are you sure I did not have them when I came?

Prof: No, you did not.

(No one speaks for some time.)

Prof: Which college do you study in?

Girl: Yes, in the first year. For the last two years. *(Suddenly)* Ah ...

Prof: No, you did not have the glasses when you came.

Mrs Sharma: You did not have glasses.

Girl: No, not glasses. It has started.

Prof: What has started?

Girl: The pain in my left leg. *(She begins moaning.)* Let me go home now.

Prof: *(irritated now)* All right, go home.

Girl: But are you sure I did not drop my glasses here?

Prof: No, no.

Girl: Let me go then.

(She walks out trying to find her way through the furniture.)

Prof: The Judge Sahib was saying that his daughter was a brilliant student.

Mrs Sharma: And sings well.

Prof: But I find she is blind.

Mrs Sharma: And stone deaf.

Devdutt: But not dumb.

Mrs Sharma: *(ignoring him)* She has rheumatism.

Prof: She is an idiot. Her IQ is zero.

Mrs Sharma: She has a funny name.

Prof: I do not approve of the girl.

Mrs Sharma: I do not approve at all.

Devdutt: But I approve of her. And I am going to have dinner with the Judge tomorrow.

Prof: I do not believe in this arrangement.

Mrs Sharma: Neither do I.

Devdutt: But I do.

(Devdutt goes out leaving his parents flabbergasted.)

Scene 2

Judge Sahib's dining room. The girl sits alone at the table looking at her watch. She says eight o'clock and Judge Sahib enters the room.)

Judge: Where is Devdutt, Pratibha? It is already eight and I do not approve of unpunctuality.

(A bearer gives the Judge Sahib a piece of paper, which he passes on to Pratibha.)

Pratibha: *(reads)* Devdutt thanks the honourable judge for his gracious invitation to dinner.

(Devdutt enters. He carries a swagger stick. He is drunk.)

Devdutt: And is pleased to accept the same.

(He bows to them with a flourish. Judge Sahib and his daughter stand to receive him and look at him not knowing what to do.)

Devdutt: Hello Judge Sahib. How do you do? Pleased to meet you. *(To the girl)* And you, dear. How do you do?

(He extends his hand, but the girl ignores him)

(Devdutt removes his jacket, drapes it across a chair and sits down comfortably.)

Devdutt: Why are you standing? Do sit down. Be comfortable. I am extremely grateful that you accepted my invitation. Extremely grateful. Please be seated.

(When they do not sit down, Devdutt picks up the stick and brandishes it at them. They sit down.)

Devdutt: *(laughs)* That's better. And what would you like to have? A whisky or a gin? Or a spot of champagne for you, mademoiselle? No? Then what will you have? A glass of water? Aqua pura ? Boy, three glasses of water, please. The Judge Sahib believes in prohibition.

(He laughs again.)

Judge: I was going to tell you...

Devdutt: I know. You want to have a drink on the quiet. Boy—

(The bearer arrives)

Devdutt: Show me the washroom, please.

(Devdutt follows the bearer inside.)

Judge: This man has no sense of time. He is mad.

Pratibha: He is a drunkard.

Judge: *Delirium tremens.* I know a man just by looking at him once and write my judgement the moment I see the accused in the dock. I know for certain that this man is due for the gallows.

Pratibha: He is dangerous.

Judge: But then I am getting late for dinner and I am a firm believer in punctuality. Boy, please, serve dinner in my bedroom.

Pratibha: Mine, too. And when that man arrives, tell him that we have gone to bed.

(Devdutt enters and brandishes his stick.)

Devdutt: Sit down. You see, I lost my way coming out of the bathroom.

(They all sit down. Devdutt passes the glasses of water to them, and says "Cheers" and starts drinking. When they do not drink, Devdutt lifts his glass and they pretend to drink. Devdutt suddenly looks at his watch.)

Devdutt: All right, you can go now. It is now time for me to go to bed. Exactly at thirteen minutes past eight. And I am a firm believer in punctuality.

(He shakes hands with Judge Sahib. They turn to leave the room)

Devdutt: Shouldn't you be thanking me for the dinner?

Judge: Oh, yes. Thank you very much.

Devdutt: *(with humility)* You are welcome. It was nice of you to come. It was my pleasure. Good night. *(Looks at his watch)* Oh my God! Eight fifteen already! I should have gone to bed now.

(Devdutt puts his head on the dining table and goes to sleep. Judge Sahib goes inside. Pratibha picks up the stick and hits Devdutt.)

Pratibha: Hey, Mister.

(Devdutt rises with a start)

Devdutt: No, I do not have your glasses.

Pratibha: Thank you, I do not use glasses. My eyesight is reasonably good.

Devdutt: But not your hearing.

Pratibha: I am not deaf either.

Devdutt: Rheumatic?

Pratibha: Not even that.

Devdutt: But then you are an idiot. Your IQ, is zero.

Pratibha: No.

Devdutt: But then?

Pratibha: I was acting, for I do not want to spoil my successful student career by marrying. And I did not want to displease my father either.

Devdutt: Good for you. You may go now. I am going to sleep now. Good night.

(Devdutt puts his head on the table to sleep. Pratibha hits him with the stick, this time a little harder. Devdutt gets up.)

Pratibha: Put on your jacket and get out quietly, you drunken fellow.

(Devdutt straightens his tie and puts on his coat.)

Devdutt: No, I am not a drunk.

Pratibha: Then you must be mad. A criminal heading for the gallows.

Devdutt: No chance.

Pratibha: *Delirium tremens?*

Devdutt: No.

Pratibha: So—

Devdutt: I have decided to marry another girl. And so I was acting so that the Judge Sahib would himself disapprove.

Pratibha: *(returns the stick to Devdutt)* That is strange!

Devdutt: No, no. There is nothing strange. You count up to fifteen and you will find everything is all right. Oh, my God. I have to meet her and I am a firm believer in punctuality.

(Devdutt hands over the stick to Pratibha and rushes out. Pratibha looks at the stick wonderingly and begins counting—one, two, three, four...)

Translated by the Author

Director's Note

Anant Mahapatra

It may surprise many who are reading this play now that for this short fifteen minutes play I had insisted on rehearsing for at least ten days continuously for almost two-three hours. I wanted every actor to memorise the dialogues, as they were short, crisp and sometimes only one or two words, but had to be delivered on cue to get the impact of spontaneity.

Even though the playwright, J.P. Das, his wife Mitra and other three characters were acting for the first time (except me playing Devdutt) none of the audience believed they were fresh and applied make-up for the first time.

My effort was to present the play as it was happening in front of the audience and had planned entry and exit as required by the dialogues and without using wings or change of light. Since the age and attire was normal for each character there wasn't any need of much extra make-up or costume except for the Professor (J.P. Das) who had to appear a little older!

Because of strenuous rehearsals at the venue itself the movement also became spontaneous and natural and audience seemed to be almost part of the 'happening'.

If I have to repeat the staging again, I would not be altering anything now.

Miss X

Miss X

Cast: Gentleman I, Gentleman II, Radheshyam, Shashank

(Radheshyam's sitting room. An old man—let's call him Gentleman I—is reading a newspaper and seems to be waiting for someone. Another old man-Gentleman II-enters. G *I rises with respect.* G *II greets him with greater respect. Both sit down. They are silent, not knowing who will initiate the conversation. With considerable hesitation,* G *I breaks the silence.)*

G *I:* I was reading today's newspaper.

G *II:* It is a commendable habit.

G *I:* If one has to keep informed about the world...

G *II:* About films, theatre, sports, literature...

G I: About politics, crime, accidents...

G II: It is only through newspapers. I can go without a meal for a day, but I cannot live without the newspaper.

G *I:* You would not believe that I had a relapse of my fever when the newspaper did not appear one day. The doctor of course said that it was because I had overeaten that day. But I know for certain that it was because I had not read the newspaper.

(There is silence again for some time.)

G *II:* What were you reading in the paper?

G *I:* The matrimonial column.

G *II:* It's strange, but that also happens to be my favourite column.

G *I:* I thought you were married.

G *II: (somewhat embarrassed)* Well, I mean I was married when I was sixteen. But then I have not been able to give up the habit.

G *I:* Same here. I consider marriage the most important thing in life.

G *II:* The most important thing in all creation.

(There is silence again.)

G *II:* All right. What is it that attracts you most in the matrimonial column?

G *I*: Dow...

G *I*: Dow—?

G *I*: *(hesitatingly)* Dow-ry.

G *II*: Yes, well, dowry. But—

G *I*: It would seem you don't support...

G *II*: Not exactly, but then...

G *I*: I also don't particularly...

G *II*: I do not believe in dowry.

G *I*: Nor do I. It is a blot on society.

G *II*: It is a crying shame.

G *I*: Down with dowry.

G *II*: Dowry has no place in marriage.

G *I*: Marriage is a heavenly institution.

G *II*: You have said it.

(Both close their eyes, as if contemplating on the heavenliness of marriage. Shasank enters, but they still do not open their eyes. Shashank coughs and they look at him.)

Shashank: You seem to be waiting for father. Have you asked someone?

G *I*: No.

Shashank: All right. I will tell him.

(Shashank goes inside.)

G *I*: I thought you were Mr. Radheshyam.

G *II*: I assumed you were Radheshyam since I had been told that he resembles a madman.

G *I*: What do you mean? Do I look like a madman? Have you seen your own face in a mirror?

G *I*: Then you should have told me from the start that you were not Radheshyam. I need not have been so respectful to you.

G *I*: You mean to say I look like a madman!

G *II*: Anyone seeing you with that newspaper would have thought you were Radheshyam.

G *I*: You mean to say I look like a madman? I would say you resemble one.

(They are shouting at each other when Radhesyham enters—his own appearance settling the argument.)

Radheshyam: I knew that you would be arguing about it.

(After an exchange of greetings, Radheshyam and the Gentlemen sit down.)

G *I*: Of course you would know.

G *II*: You are all-knowing.

G *I*: You are omniscient.

Radheshyam: *(ignoring it all)* But what did you conclude? Lucky Nine or Chhoti Begum?

G *I*: Lucky Begum?

G *II*: Chhoti Nine?

(Radheshyam rises. So *do the two Gentlemen.)*

Radheshyam: *(to* G *I)* Who do you think will win? Lucky Nine or Chhoti Begum?

G *I*: *(hesitatingly)* Chhoti Begum.

Radheshyam: Ha, ha. You make me laugh. Chhoti Begum! Ha, ha. You do not know a thing.

G *II*: *(with confidence)* Who says Chhoti Begum will win? Lucky Nine is bound to be the winner.

Radheshyam: Ha, ha. You too are a funny fellow. Lucky Nine! You seem to be completely ignorant.

G *I*: You mean neither will win?

Radheshyam: That is right. It is X's turn.

G *II*: What!

Radheshyam: You are absolutely uninformed.

G *II*: No, Sir, I read the newspaper...

Radheshyam: You read the newspaper?

G *II*: No. no. When I came in, this gentleman was reading the paper.

G *I*: Who was reading it? I was only fanning myself with it. I use newspapers only to pack fish.

G *II*: I wrap my slippers in newspaper.

(Radheshyam does not bother. They remain silent.)

Radheshyam: So why did you come here?

G *I:* I know your son Shankar.

G *II:* Shankar is a good friend of mine.

Radheshyam: But—

G *I:* No, no. My daughter Mira is his student.

G *II:* My daughter Nira is his student too.

Radheshyam: So they have done badly in their exams? And you expect Shankar to help? No, thank you. You may go. Goodbye.

(Radheshyam gets up.)

G *I:* No, it is not that. Shankar wants to marry Mira.

G *II:* No, he wishes to marry Nira.

G *I:* Nira? Can't be. Nira is ugly.

G *II:* Mira is a hunchback.

G *I:* Nira is lame.

G *II:* Mira is blind.

G *I:* Nira is deaf and dumb.

Radheshyam: In any case bigamy is illegal.

G *I:* No, Shankar will marry only Mira.

G *II:* Only Nira.

Radheshyam: What do you want me to do?

G *I:* Shankar has only selected. You have to give your approval.

G *II:* How can the marriage take place without your assent?

(Radheshyam sits down.)

Radheshyam: Well, then. Do you believe in dowry?

(Both keep quiet trying to appraise Radheshyam's mind.)

Radheshyam: I do.

G *I:* I also believe in dowry.

G *II:* Who does not?

Radheshyam: Then let's get it straight. How much are you willing to give?

G *I:* Five thousand.

(Radheshyam looks at G II.)

G *II:* Seven thousand.

G *I*: Eight thousand five hundred.

G *II*: Ten thousand.

Radheshyam: Please continue with the bids. I will return in a minute.

(Radheshyam goes in)

G *I*: Twelve thousand.

G *II*: Fourteen thousand.

(Shashank enters. He is dressed in a suit. Both mistake him for Shankar.)

G *I*: Mr Shankar—

Shashank: No, I am Shankar's younger brother. And my marriage is years away. But what are you doing here?

G *I*: We were discussing Shankar's marriage.

Shashank: Shankar's marriage? But he has already arranged his marriage with Ira.

(Shashank leaves)

G *I*: Thank God. Shankar is marrying my daughter.

G *II*: He said Nira. Not Mira.

G *I*: No, I am sure he said Mira.

G *II*: No, it was Nira. I am glad I will not have to give any dowry.

G *I*: Who is paying dowry in any case? Shankar has himself decided to marry Mira.

G *II*: *(to himself)* I am sure I heard him say Nira.

(Both keep silent)

G *I*: *(to himself)* I knew X would win.

G *II*: What X? *(Correcting himself)* Of course everyone knew that X would win.

G *I*: But you also said Lucky Begum would win.

G *II*: Then tell me what is X?

G *I*: *(laughs)* So you do not know! Why should I tell you?

G *II*: Which means you do not know.

(They keep quiet, and start reading the newspaper, each a sheet. Radheshyam *enters. They do not rise this time.* Radheshyam *sits down.)*

Radheshyam: Have you finished your bidding?

G *I*: It may sound strange to you, but I do not believe in dowry.

G *II*: Dowry is a slur on society.

G *I*: Dowry is a crying shame.

G *II*: And you will be pleased to know that Shankar has decided to marry Nira.

G *I*: Not Nira, Mira.

G *II*: No, no. It is Nira.

Radheshyam: Oh, Shankar only decided. He has not yet married the girl, has he? His decision means nothing. He may change his mind. It is I who will finalise his marriage.

G *I*: Well, then, it is fourteen thousand.

G *II*: I am sorry. I was mistaken. Of course I believe in dowry. Fifteen thousand.

(It strikes eight in the clock.)

Radheshyam: I am going to have my supper. Please decide between yourselves.

(Radheshyam goes inside. It becomes dark. It strikes nine and the lights come on as the two gentlemen are seated.)

G *II*: Twenty-three thousand.

G *I*: Twenty-three thousand and two hundred.

G *II*: Twenty-four thousand.

G *I*: Twenty-four thousand and two hundred.

G *II*: Twenty-five thousand.

G *I*: Twenty-five thousand and two hundred.

(Lights go off. It strikes ten. Lights come on.)

G *II*: Look here, I cannot keep bidding with you in this manner. You are really tight-fisted. Such slow bidding! I will wait till Radheshyam comes.

G *I*: All right. I will then mention such a figure that you will get a heart attack.

(Radheshyam comes.)

Radheshyam: So what did you decide?

G *I*: I will pay fifty thousand.

G *II*: Seventy-five thousand.

G *I*: *(knowing he has lost)* Let me leave. It is late.

(G *I leaves. Shashank enters. They do not look at him.)*

G *II*: If you wish, I will make out the cheque now.

(He takes out a cheque book and writes.)

Shashank: It was X which won.

Radheshyam: Exactly as I thought.

Shashank: But what is happening here?

G *II*: We were deciding about Shankar's marriage.

Shashank: Shankar's marriage? *(He laughs)* He got married this evening. I am returning from the wedding party. Enjoyable party. Drinks and dinner.

Radheshyam: Whom did he marry? Mira?

G *II*: It must be Nira. *(He destroys the cheque.)*

Shashank: Neither Mira nor Nira. He married Ira.

G *II*: It is late. I must leave.

Radheshyam: I always knew who would win.

(He goes inside)

G *II*: *(Goes out, but returns)* Is X Ira's pet name?

(Shashank laughs. He is drunk and mimes a horse.)

G *II*: Now I know. The winning filly.

(G *II leaves. Shashank collects the torn bits of the cheque and looks at them longingly.)*

Shashank: Seventy-five thousand rupees! What a fool Shankar is! But I refuse to be like him. I would like to have seventy-five thousand rupees. I will not fall in love.

Translated by the Author

Notes on Translators

Ravi Baswani (1946-2010) was a well known theatre and film actor and director, remembered for his role in the film *Jaane Bhi Do Yaron.* He played the role of Professor in *Sabse Neeche Ka Aadmi,* the Hindi version of *The Underdog,* and later directed the play for his own group in Delhi.

Paul St-Pierre was Professor of Semiotics and Translation at the University of Montreal, Canada. He has collaborated on the English translation of many Odia literary works including several books by J.P. Das. He has also co-edited books on the theory of translation.

Leelawati Mohapatra and **K.K. Mohapatra** have translated extensively from Odia into Englilsh. Their translations include *Spider's Web and Other Stories* by J.P. Das and *Ants, Ghosts and Whispering Trees: an Anthology of Oriya Short Stories* with Paul St-Pierre.

J.P. (Jagannath Prasad) Das is an eminent Odia poet, essayist, fiction writer and playwright. His books have been widely translated and his plays have been performed in different parts of India in many languages. He has also authored several books on Odishan art.

He was a member of the Indian Administrative Service, but left it for full-time research and writing.

He is a recipient of many honours including the Sahitya Akademi Award, the Saraswati Samman and the Nandikar Award for Theatre. A pioneer of new Odia theatre, he is a trustee of Utkal Rangamanch Trust which is concerned with the revival of theatre in Odisha. He has also been the Vice-Chairman of National School of Drama.

Born in 1936 in Odisha, he lives and works in New Delhi.

Born in 1947 in Assam, **Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee** is a reputed scholar, academician and translator. He has taught English Literature at a College under Gauhati University and Comparative Literature at Jadavpur University, Kolkata. He has also held important positions including that of the Director, National Book Trust, and Editor of the Sahitya Akademi's journal, *Indian Literature*. His English translation of books by major Bengali fiction-writers have been well received.

Bhattacharjee currently works as the Director of K.K. Birla Foundation, New Delhi.

J.P. Das has now secured his place among the leading playwrights of the country.

— *Enact*

I started reading the play *Before the Sunset* and stopped only after finishing it. I could feel the protagonist Deepankar enter into my self. Towards the end, I felt the environment engulfed in deep silence. The sad symphony of a conscious world began to sway and I went to Dina Bhai and told him. "Brother, I want to direct this play."

— *Ram Gopal Bajaj*

Before the Sunset has as its theme a sane schizophrenic.... Each character of this play is an intellectual abstraction that lends it its vitality. It is structurally well-knit and the trial scene has the power and logic of an absurd drama.

— *Indira Parthasarathy*

J.P. Das is a poet turned playwright and his poetic sensitivity, compassion and perspective inform his plays.... He leaves many things to the imagination of the audience or gives only suggestions, as a poet would. But he does succeed in saying many things with a minimum of words.

— *J.N. Kaushal*

Sundarlas is a significant addition to Indian dramatic literature. The play is an insightful treatment of the politics of conversion.

— *H.S. Shivaprakash*